

THE  
BRIDE COMES TO  
EVENSFORD

*And Other Tales*

by

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*To*  
*DILYS POWELL*  
*and*  
*LEONARD. RUSSELL*



THE BRIDE COMES TO EVENSFORD

*And Other Tales*



## THE BRIDE COMES TO EVENSFORD

IT was thirty-one years since she had first come up by the one-track railway to Evensford, where from only two people knew: a girl of twenty-three, carrying all her belongings in a new straw dress-basket, on a wet April afternoon when flocks of pearl-grey sea-gulls floated in the spring floods by the river and the clear rain shone grey on the unpainted domes of the new gasometers of the station. Then, as it still did, the three-coach train came in backwards, engine behind. It ran up from the junction past the iron furnaces, across the fourteen brick arches of the track over the river, past the wooden signalbox where the key of the branch-line was surrendered and then retrieved by the fireman on the return journey, past the brick-works and the factories, and so under the yellow footbridge to where on the platform the carrier pigeons muttered softly in flat baskets as they waited for the returning train. In thirty-one years it was surprising how little these things had changed. Nor was there much change in Evensford itself. To her it still seemed, except for herself and one other person, a town of the dead.

She had come to Evensford that day to be head assistant in the drapery shop of Fred Cartwright, Manchester and London warehouse. Cartwright had known her for about two years as Miss Cassell, head of the blouse department of a Macclesfield warehouse in Cannon Street, where he went to buy on the first Monday of every month. The Miss Cassell whom

Fred Cartwright knew was a tall girl with light brown hair and delicate, efficient hands. She was not particularly good-looking, but Cartwright liked her. Her neck seemed rather too long, but she wore round it a band of black velvet that gave her a sort of stateliness. Apart from her lovely hands – she could play the piano very well – the most striking thing about her was her eyes. They were very curious, though Cartwright never seemed to notice that. They were a cold clear grey and they would have been as shallow and bright as glass except that they seemed to draw all their life from preoccupation. But it was a preoccupation that was not sad; nor regretful; nor even troubled. It seemed to express a kind of wistful calculation.

That afternoon there was no one to meet her as she came out of the station in the heavy rain. She thought perhaps Cartwright might have been there, and she was bitterly disappointed. As she walked out of the station and into the High Street, feeling very alone and friendless, she lifted her face to the rain and had her first sight of Evensford. Any moment of the future when Evensford seemed like a town of the dead was half a repetition of that moment. The emptiness of the street made her stop abruptly on the pavement. The rain beat on her face and clothes and hands, but she did not seem to notice it. It was early-closing day and the blinds of the shops were down and there was no traffic moving. The slates of the roofs were grey in the rain and the street too was grey except for the patches of horse-manure washed into tobacco-yellow pools by the rain and the rainbow patches of orange-skin oil streaming down the camber of the road and flowing down the brown water of the gutters. As she walked up the street, feeling the handle of the dress-

basket grow stickier under the rain, she looked at the shops. Here and there a blind was not drawn and she could see in a window a few boxes of fly-blown confectionery, rolls of cheap lino, a pile of dirty cabbages pressed against the glass, a group of clumsy, fusty dummies wearing last year's styles. And in the windows where blinds were drawn she could see the reflection of herself, tall, slim-waisted, rather stately, rather aloof, skimming smoothly past. One or two people passed her as she walked farther up the deserted street, but whenever they looked at her she lifted her head and looked at the names on the shop-fronts, her face deliberately upturned. 'So this,' she thought, 'is Evensford. This is it,' as if she had clearly made up her mind never to be part of it all.

When she got to the Cartwright shop, a double-windowed place with black strip shutters and a small gallery with a flagpole outside the windows upstairs, she rang the bell of the private door in the side alleyway. But it was not Cartwright who answered her, and again she was disappointed.

'I am Mrs. Cartwright,' the woman said. 'Mr. Cartwright's mother.'

'Oh yes,' she said. 'I am Miss Cassell.'

'Miss Cassell from London?'

'Yes.'

'But we thought it was Saturday.'

'No, it was Thursday. Mr. Cartwright said distinctly Thursday. I've got the letter. It was distinctly Thursday.'

'How ridiculous. How stupid.'

'I'm sorry.'

'Oh, no! Not you, not you. Not you at all. Fred, Mr. Cartwright. Just like him. No sense of reality at all.'

He just floats from day to day. One day just like another. Anyway, come in out of the rain, Miss Cassell, come in.'

Mrs. Cartwright was dressed in black with many pins stuck into the bodice of her dress. Her face was angular and thin and white, with brown eyes that were dark underneath. As she stepped back into the house she seemed to dissolve into the darkness of the passage, so that only the pale face and the pale hands and the little silver pins remained distinctly visible. Miss Cassell followed her into the passage and set the wet dress-basket on the floor. Mrs. Cartwright picked it up. It was a gesture of suave annoyance. It made Miss Cassell so blank and impotent with resentment that she could not speak or move. 'I'll take it into the kitchen,' Mrs. Cartwright said. 'Then I'll show you upstairs.'

They went upstairs, neither she nor Mrs. Cartwright speaking. The house had a clean, barren smell, almost a holy smell, of cleanliness. It came down the dark pine stairs like a cool draught and it hung in the bedroom, about the white wooden chest-of-drawers and the small brass bedstead and the ivy-flowered shining lino and over the plush-framed texts on the walls, like a sterilizing invisible cloud.

'This is the room we thought of giving you until you can find lodgings,' Mrs. Cartwright said.

'Thank you.'

'You will excuse me now. I'm doing the books. I always do the books on Thursday afternoons.'

'Yes. Is Mr. Cartwright in?'

'Mr. Cartwright is asleep. He generally sleeps on Thursday afternoons.'

'Could I have my dress-basket? My things?'

'It was very wet,' Mrs. Cartwright said. 'The girl will bring it up.'

Later it took her more than an hour, moving slowly, to unpack and change her things. Her coat and hat and stockings were wet, and she hung them on the brass bedrail to dry until she could take them downstairs. The house was completely silent: as if Cartwright and his mother, and even the maid, had forgotten her. As she dressed she looked down on the wet street below. It was from her window that you reached the little balcony. She stood for a long time watching the rain dripping from the empty flagpole down on to the empty street, and then finally when she was dressed and ready she went downstairs.

It was a strange reception, but it became stranger still. Downstairs she stood in the dark hall and listened for a sound of life. Somewhere the rain was dribbling with a choking sound from a gutter, and it was the only sound she could hear for some time. The passage was long and narrow, with two doors on either side and a single door at the opposite end from the entrance. She opened one of the side-doors and looked in. It was the dining-room and tea was laid at a round mahogany table, but the room was empty. She shut the door and stood rather apprehensively listening again: not nervous, only rather proud and lonely and injured. Then before she could open another door, and while she was still wondering about Cartwright and his mother, she heard a sound. It came from the door at the end of the passage: a soft irregular sound rather like the sound of a gently bouncing ball.

She opened the door, and it was the shop itself, dark now except for a little light coming in at the unshuttered side-window, and the sound was the sound of a

white cat playing along the counter with an unravelled roll of dark red ribbon. She took the cat in her arms and stroked it and walked slowly round the shop with it in her hands. As she looked up at the shelves of materials, the print, the satin and the calico, the hat-boxes, the ribbons, the ranges of drawers all neatly lettered, the flat rolls of fabrics and blankets piled against the walls, she looked something like a cat herself, very quiet, rather deliberate, her eyes full of sleepy concentration. She was to know later that Cartwright's was the largest shop of its kind in Evensford; but the knowledge did not tell her any more than her walk round the shop on that first wet April afternoon with the white cat in her hands: the cat that was to be almost her only friend in Evensford for quite some years. The shop, fusty and dark, a little old-fashioned but sound and prosperous, satisfied and comforted and even excited one part of herself. The cat thrust its cool wet nose against her long throat and comforted and excited another.

Coming out of the shop, still carrying the cat in her hands, she was in time to see Mrs. Cartwright emerging from another door. The long angular face looked grim and spare.

'I couldn't find my way,' Miss Cassell said. 'I opened the wrong door and found the cat playing with the ribbons.'

'All right,' Mrs. Cartwright said. 'In future *this* is the drawing-room, *that* is my office, and *this* is the dining-room. I daresay tea will be ready now, Miss Cassell,' she said. 'Fred!'

A few moments later, from the drawing-room, came Cartwright himself. He was sleepily smoothing his thin dark hair with his hands. He did not seem to Miss



Cassell at all like the Mr. Cartwright she knew: the well-brushed, easy-talking, persuasive Mr. Cartwright who in London gave the feeling of self-reliance and prosperity and took her to lunch at somewhere a little above the usual ABC and rode with her on the tops of buses with his hat on his knees, laughing rather too heartily, and bought her buttonholes of red roses and maidenhair on early spring afternoons. There was no sign of this Mr. Cartwright, who seemed to have been replaced by someone who had suddenly been cruelly awakened and was trying to decide what day and what time of day it was.

'Fred, if you've had your sleep out,' Mrs. Cartwright said, 'this is Miss Cassell. And why pray did you say Thursday if you meant Saturday?'

'I think - I -'

'Sometimes I think you'll never grow up,' Mrs. Cartwright said. 'Sometimes I think you'll never grow up.'

'I'm sorry, mother. I'm sorry, Miss -'

'I should think so. I should indeed pray and hope you are sorry. Now say good afternoon to Miss Cassell in a proper manner.'

'Good afternoon, Miss Cassell,' Cartwright said.

'Good afternoon,' she said.

'I'm sorry I -'

'Let us have tea now,' his mother said, 'let us have tea. And pray put the cat down, Miss Cassell, please.'

At tea the girl was very silent, listening and watching. It was as if Cartwright, a man of twenty-eight or nine, were a small boy. 'Your tea is already sugared, Fred. Don't be so absent-minded. Pay attention!' It was as if he had never made, and had no means of making, an independent personal decision

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about his life. 'Some more bread and butter, Fred! Take another slice. Go on! You don't eat enough!'

It surprised her very much that Cartwright should be so meek. In London he had sometimes given her the impression of a man of rosy enterprise. There was a dream or two of which he had sometimes given her a glimpse as they rode home to her lodgings on the bus-top. They were dreams of the shop. From these dreams she already knew something of what the turn-over of the shop was, how it had decreased or stood still, how Cartwright planned to increase it. She was attracted by these figures, by the possibility of the dreams, as another woman might have been attracted by the dream of marriage. They were in fact her dream of marriage: she would marry Cartwright and in marrying Cartwright she would marry the shop. In London she saw her life foreshortened by the dark walls of Cannon Street. In Evensford it opened out: bright, infinite, prosperous. In Evensford anything could happen. She saw Evensford, as represented by the shop, the parochial angularity of Mrs. Cartwright and the empty rainy street, as a little town populated only by little people, and she knew that the littleness of it could not frustrate her.

'When do you plan to start with us, Miss Cassell?'

'Tomorrow? - when you like,' she said.

'I'm glad to hear it,' Mrs. Cartwright said. 'We have been grossly understaffed since Miss Garvin married that man.'

'Tomorrow then?'

'Friday is very busy. They are paid here on Fridays. We shall be glad of all the help we can. By the by, there are four other girls besides yourself. Miss Johnson, Miss Clark, Miss Dickins and Miss Hustwaite. We

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open at half-past eight and close at seven on ordinary nights. Eight on Fridays and nine on Saturdays. Are you chapel?"

'I -'

'We are chapel ourselves,' Mrs. Cartwright said.

'Yes.'

'I try to attend once every Sunday. Fred goes twice, sometimes three times. He is in the choir. We have a good many musical Sundays. It is rather a musical town.'

'Miss Cassell plays the piano,' Cartwright said.

'Oh, yes? Oh! indeed?' Mrs. Cartwright said. 'That will be useful.'

'Very,' Cartwright said. 'Very. I -'

'Don't sprawl on the table, Fred! You've got jam on the sleeve of your coat as it is. Pray put yourself in Miss Cassell's place for a moment. I wonder what she thinks of you.'

Cartwright sat silent, meek and overcome, rubbing the sleeve of his jacket with his hand and then licking his fingers.

'And don't lick your fingers! Go upstairs and wash! And before you go to choir-practice put on a clean collar. It looks quite disgraceful.'

Miss Cassell sat silent. She sat silent for most of the rest of that evening, she on one side of the fire in the sitting-room, Mrs. Cartwright on the other. Mrs. Cartwright, too, scarcely spoke. The rain fell heavily all evening and Miss Cassell could hear it running down the roof pipes in the long silences.

About nine o'clock she said good night and went to bed. Going upstairs she felt something run past her legs. It was the white cat. She caught it in her hands and held it against her blouse, in the crook of her arm and took it into her bedroom. She undressed by the

light of the street-lamp that shone through the window, and while she undressed herself the cat lay curled on the bed. She got into bed and the cat lay with her, quiet against her shoulder. She lay awake for a long time, watching the rain, lemon and silver from the street-light, slowly pouring down the window panes beyond the curtains, listening to the sound of feet splashing past on the wet pavement below and to the sound of the rain, and thinking of Cartwright, of the man as she knew him and of the man she had seen that day. Thinking, she lay perfectly still, like the cat. Her eyes were made more grey and cool by the wet light falling on them from outside, the pre-occupation of them not sad or regretful because she had come to the empty streets of a little town like Evensford, but simply preoccupied, detached and unemotional as the eyes of the cat lying at her side.

Cartwright had sometimes made fussy, eager attempts to kiss her when they met in London. Now, as the spring came on and moved towards summer, he made more eager attempts to kiss her, on the stairs or in the stock-room or at the back of the shop. And in a cool, unawakened way she would let him kiss her and she did not mind.

When Cartwright kissed her it did not mean very much to her. The daily life of the shop was very strict. Mrs. Cartwright sat in the centre of the shop at the cash-desk from which radiated the wires of the new cash-and-change system that Cartwright had recently installed. Like the criss-crossed wires of a toy overhead railway, the system covered completely the two floors of Cartwright's, the little cash receptacles flying smoothly and noisily over the counters, to and from the

black figure of Mrs. Cartwright, the person who really governed them. No one who came into or left the shop escaped the eyes of the woman watching through the windows of the cash-desk. The eyes turned themselves, cold and brown and rather sick, on every movement of the assistants too. The long pale yellow hands reached out and checked the figures of every account. So when Cartwright kissed Miss Cassell on the stairs in the house, or in the stock-room, away from the eyes of his mother, there was an air of secrecy which should have excited her. But for some reason or other she did not feel excited. She knew that she had no thought of falling in love with Cartwright. His kisses were rather wet and brief, and it seemed to her that he was like a boy who eats jam in a dark pantry when his mother is no longer there to see. On the other hand she did not resist Cartwright. Whenever he wanted to kiss her, whether it was in the shop or between the street-lights under the lime trees as they walked back together from choir-practice late at night, her lips were always there, cool and smooth as paper and almost as lifeless. Her eyes were always open, looking passively past his face, far into air.

All that summer she did the work that was expected of her at Cartwright's, and she behaved as if she liked it. Outside the shop too she did the things that were expected of her, and she behaved also as if she liked them. She sang in the choir with Cartwright and played the piano at the mid-week practices. It was the day of outings in wagonettes on summer Saturday afternoons. She went on many of these outings with Cartwright, with the choir or the teachers of the Sunday school or the Order of Rechabites or the shop assistants of the town. They drove through miles of

dusty gentle countryside, through small brown stone villages on the upper reaches of the river, where fishermen sat bent over rods on becalmed afternoons. She always sat still and rather erect and rather aloof. When Cartwright asked her if she liked it she would say that she liked it. But always, whether on the outings or in the shop or in the house, her eyes looked away from Cartwright when she answered him. They seemed sometimes to have an immunity from all emotion. They seemed like the eyes of someone living an utterly separate life.

Cartwright, for whom there were two lives, the life of domination by his mother and the life of secret moments with Miss Cassell, did not notice this. He had begun to fall in love with Miss Cassell some time before she came to Evensford. He thought of her as rather select: too good for the parochial commonness of the small, one-street town. He was pleased by her, and excited by her, as he would be by a new model from London. She was not only very different from all that Evensford stood for. He knew that other people thought of her too like that. That pleased him. It showed him to be, after all, a man of good taste and sane enterprise, and he felt flattered. Not many young men went far out of Evensford for a girl, and his love for her had a kind of tender pride. He was rather surprised about it too. He was surprised that whenever he wanted her she was there, that whatever he wanted to do she too wanted to do. He was surprised by the passive docility of a person who, all that summer, had not made another friend.

They came home late one August evening from an outing. It was very hot and the wagonette was white with dust and she could feel the dust in her throat and

hair. They went into the side-door of the house, and as they stood in the passage Cartwright kissed her. 'My lips are dusty,' she said. 'I feel dust all over. What time is it? He said it was past eleven o'clock and she said she would like a drink before she went to bed. The house was very silent and they talked in whispers. 'Go up now,' he said, 'and I'll bring you a drink. Some lemonade.'

She went upstairs and lay on the bed, not undressing, her arms outstretched. On very many nights the cat lay there, waiting for her, but tonight she lay on the bed alone, thinking. The street-light was out, and it was very dark in the room and when Cartwright came upstairs he had taken off his shoes and made no noise. He shut the door of the room as he came in and she felt him put the glass against her face. It was cool and she drank slowly. Then she gave him the glass and said, 'You,' and Cartwright drank a little and then put the glass on the chest-of-drawers. A moment later she felt him lie on the bed beside her. She felt him put his hand on her throat and try to unclasp the velvet band she was wearing. At last it came away and he ran his hand down her long clear neck and then kissed her again. She felt his hands moving up and down her body and she let them move wherever Cartwright wanted, passive, unexcited by whatever he did. She let it go on for a long time without speaking. And finally she turned her face on the pillow and spoke to him. 'You know if you do this you'll have to marry me? Sooner or later. One day?'

'Yes,' he said. 'I know. That's what I want. That's why I came.'

'I don't want you to go on if you don't want that. If you don't know what you're doing.'

'I do want it. I do know. It's what I've always wanted. Always. Haven't you? Haven't you?'

Her eyes looked past him and remained fixed in the darkness broken only by the very faint light of the summer stars.

'Yes,' she said. 'It's what I've wanted.'

They were married in the October of that year and it was as if the marriage also meant nothing to her. As before, she continued to work in the shop. She was cool and efficient and if anything rather more aloof. As before, from the cash-desk with its neat system of wires, Mrs. Cartwright, the mother, dominated everything.

And as before, the younger Mrs. Cartwright seemed to let herself be dominated. She was quite obedient and docile. It seemed as if there were nothing she wanted. She went on doing whatever was expected of her, as if she liked doing it, the same as ever. When Cartwright wanted her to go out with him she went; when he wanted her to play hymns for him on Sunday evenings she played them on the piano in the drawing-room; whenever he wanted her she was ready and he could take her.

The weather that winter was very cold and the wind whipped bitterly into the shop from the frozen street whenever the door was open. It cut into the pigeon-hole of the cash-desk where the elder Mrs. Cartwright sat with her coat buttoned about her neck.

One morning when the assistants came in to work Mrs. Cartwright was not at the cash-desk. Upstairs, in the elder Mrs. Cartwright's bedroom, the two women were talking.

'Two days in bed and you will be yourself again.'



'I will not be told what to do and what not to do and I will not stay in bed.'

'If you get up it may eventually mean a week in bed.'

'I've never had a week in bed in my life!'

'You look very poorly and I think you're running a temperature. But, anyway, we'll see what the doctor says.'

'Doctor? Doctor?'

'Yes. I sent for him. Fred and I agreed that it would be better.'

'You've no right to do that! You've no right!'

'Fred has a right,' the girl said. 'You don't want to die, do you?'

'Die? Die? Who's going to die? I am not going to die and I don't want a doctor.'

'All right,' the young Mrs. Cartwright said. 'If you don't want a doctor no one can make you have one. I'll send Maisie to tell him not to come.'

The doctor did not come that day or the next and on the afternoon of the second day Mrs. Cartwright got out of her bed and walked about the shop, staring at the assistants with sick brown eyes. After some time she began to walk up the shop stairs to the upstairs department. She walked very slowly, clinging to the banisters with one hand, and she was half-way up the stairs when she fell down.

For six weeks Mrs. Cartwright lay in bed, and now she looked like an old shrunken woman. Each day she asked to get up. 'With rheumatic fever?' the doctor said. 'Don't you value your heart? It's the heart that has to be watched with this thing.' There was nothing much she could say in answer to that and the old look of domination in her eyes was very small.

All the time, downstairs, in the shop, though she was not to know of it until the day she shuffled down in her dressing-gown, groping from chair to counter like a person who could not see, there was a new source of domination. It was as if the younger Mrs. Cartwright had suddenly woken up. It was she now who sat in the cash-desk. It was she now who shut herself in the rear office on Thursday afternoons and, while Cartwright himself slept, went slowly and with methodical concentration over the books.

On these afternoons, when she had finished the books for the week, she would go back over the books for the year, and then for many years. They gradually formed in her mind a picture of the history of the shop. She saw how it had grown from being in 1880 a little millinery business carried on in the front parlour of the newly-married Cartwrights. She saw how it had grown from this one room to its first shop, with two rooms above, in a side street, and so from the side street to the main street in 1900. She saw how it had grown up with Evensford, selling what Evensford wanted. She saw in the change of handwriting in the ledgers the mark of the elder Cartwright's death and then the long smooth sequence of pages never damaged or broken until now, at last, she had changed them herself.

In this same way, relentlessly simple and efficient, she took over the rest of the shop. For years the windows had been dressed by Cartwright every Monday morning: drab, over-crowded, old-fashioned, safe. Now she began to dress them herself. She did things that began to startle Evensford. She began to change the windows on Fridays; it gave colour to the eyes of people who were paid on Fridays. She began to give

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Evensford styles and patterns that Evensford had only dreamed about and for a time did not want. And during these weeks of change it seemed to Cartwright that she was very wonderful.

Finally when the elder Mrs. Cartwright came downstairs again the young Mrs. Cartwright's change had become part of the routine and tradition of the shop. The old woman stood in the shop, one hand on the counter the other holding the shawl about her neck, and looked at the changes there and tried to protest. She opened her mouth, but her teeth were not in, and the dark cavity of the mouth looked weak and old. The brown, once dominating eyes roved weakly to and fro and blinked as if they could not see. The long thin fingers, quivering and jerking spasmodically, looked blue and scaly and dead like the feet of a dead chicken.

'It's all right, mother. Ida is taking care of things,' Cartwright said. 'You're not strong yet. You've got to remember your heart. You've got to leave things more to Ida now.'

After that it was only the heart of the elder Mrs. Cartwright that expressed any domination in the changing shop. The weakened heart dominated all she felt, or did or wanted to do. 'With a heart like yours,' Cartwright said, 'you can't do quite as you used to do.' So she no longer did the books or sat in the cash-desk or helped to buy and sell the things for the shop. She came into the shop sometimes and sat behind the counter and with frail jerky hands cut off a length of ribbon and twined it crudely about her fingers. She sat for a time and talked to the people she knew.

The former Miss Cassell did not know anybody in Evensford whom she could talk to over the counter.

She did not want to know anybody she could talk to. In four years she had come no closer to Evensford than on the first rainy afternoon when she had walked, lonely and disappointed, up the deserted street. She did not want to come any closer than that. After four or five years she did not feel that she loved Cartwright any more than on the day he had first kissed her, and she knew that she would not love him now. She could not in fact remember having loved anyone and certainly, she thought, there is no one in Evensford who will ever trouble me.

After three years the elder Mrs. Cartwright had to be pushed about in a bath-chair and sometimes on fine afternoons, in the first slack hour after lunch, the young Mrs. Cartwright pushed her through the main street of Evensford as far as the edge of the town. From that point, beyond the end of the railway, you could see the green meadows of the river valley and the red and blue town, and scattered along the far valley-side and after heavy rain the floods that lay like a lake, pearl-grey with the sea-gulls, between. For a few moments the two women would gaze across the valley and then, not speaking, turn back. Going back through the town the young Mrs. Cartwright would stop the bath-chair from time to time so that people could speak to the elder Mrs. Cartwright. As they spoke, kind, considerate, compassionate, gossipy, foolish, she stood behind the bath-chair and grasped the handle formally with her hands and kept herself aloof and silent. There was no one in Evensford to whom she wanted to be kind or considerate or compassionate. There was no one with whom she wanted to gossip, and most of all she was not a fool.

One afternoon in the late winter of the fourth year

she had been at Evensford she pushed Mrs. Cartwright to the edge of the town. The wind blowing over the dark edge of the valley was icy, driving with it sharp spits of rain. 'Are you cold?' the former Miss Cassell said.

'I am a little cold.'

'I don't think it will hurt you.'

'I would like to go back.'

'I don't think it will hurt you.'

She stood with her hands grasping the back of the bath-chair, gazing across the valley. She was not thinking of Mrs. Cartwright, but of the shop. What she wanted had begun to take shape in her mind. Below, across the valley, the many sea-gulls rose and fell in the wind above the waters. She watched them vaguely. What she saw in reality was the shop enlarging and extending itself: another window, perhaps two windows, another floor, a whole new fitting department, a rest room, perhaps a café. Her eyes were cold in the wind and grey and distant with calculation. She did not feel the rain. What she felt was the rosy impact of a dream. No one, looking at the cold grey blank eyes, could have told how warm and excited she was. No one could have told what she was thinking: how gradually, by calculated stages she would take the shop away from the Cartwrights and make it her own.

She must have stood there, gazing at the gulls on the water, for a long time. When she came to herself the elder Mrs. Cartwright was crying. The sharp cold rain was beating harshly into her face and she was crying like a child: 'Take me back. I keep asking you. I'm so cold. I keep asking you. I keep asking you.'

Slowly, not speaking, the younger Mrs. Cartwright

turned the bath-chair and pushed it back to the town.

By the following Sunday they were offering prayers in the chapel for the recovery of the elder Mrs. Cartwright. In the evening the younger Mrs. Cartwright sat at the back of the chapel, in the gas-light, and leaned her head on the hard cool rim of the pew. She did not close her eyes; she was not troubled. The words of appeal and prayer floated past her. 'Oh, Lord! Oh, Lord! Look down on us and remember us. But remember we beseech Thee above all Thy servant who lies so ill at this time.' They were words which might have concerned someone she did not know and had never known.

In the morning she stood at the window of her bedroom and watched two men spreading straw across the street below. It was raining and there was no wind and in the dark morning air the wide band of new wet straw shone brightly. The horse traffic drove over it and the sound of hoofs and wheels had a rustling ghostly sound.

In the shop the assistants did not talk much. The working of the overhead cash-carrying system had ceased. It was strangely silent. The two elder assistants, Miss Johnson and Miss Dickins, who had been with the Cartwrights for fifteen years, came to work in shoes with rubber soles. They worked upstairs a great deal and that day you could not hear them walking overhead. After lunch Miss Johnson, who was short-sighted and wore spectacles, began to cry. The tears misted her spectacles and she could not see, and finally she cried for a long time alone in the stock-room.

All that day people came into the shop to ask, in whispers, how the elder Mrs. Cartwright was. The shopkeepers of the street ran in for a moment and

whispered. Towards evening the doctor came again, for the third time, and seeing him, Miss Johnson burst into tears again and the shop was full of the painful sound of her crying.

The young Mrs. Cartwright did not understand the tears or the solicitude; and both, especially the tears of Miss Johnson, annoyed her. 'Everyone has to die,' she said to Miss Johnson. 'Do you want her to live and suffer?'

She walked about the shop with calm unexalted face, speaking in her normal voice. Why should she change because someone else was dying? Did it matter if she was the only person in Evensford who did not care whether a grey, wasted, suffering woman died or not? She was outside the life of Evensford. The elder Mrs. Cartwright had given it the clothes and hats and underwear and fashions it wanted. They were the things that the former Miss Cassell hated: the old, shabby, out-of-date, ridiculous things that were part of the soul of a little town. She despised them and now, like Mrs. Cartwright, they were passing.

Another thing she did not understand was the feeling of Cartwright himself. He sat all day with his mother, watching her. He ate meals of biscuit and hot milk and did not come down into the shop. He walked about like a small boy who has lost the key of a clock-work toy and knows that the toy will not work any more. Seeing him, it occurred to her that Cartwright loved his mother. It even occurred to her now that Mrs. Cartwright might have loved her son. The curious ways of affection defeated her. She remembered the tyranny of Mrs. Cartwright at the dining-table. 'Fred, you're not eating enough. Take a little more, take a little more! Go on, go on. And pick up

your napkin!' She remembered the impatient despair, the domination, the refusal to see Cartwright as a man. 'Sometimes I think you'll never grow up.'

Now she knew that Mrs. Cartwright had never wanted her son to grow up; that the tyranny and the domination were her way of preserving an image and a dream. That too was something which seemed to her weak and ridiculous. The basis of love was not tyranny; certainly it was not illusion; certainly not a dream.

That evening, as she sat alone in the drawing-room, Cartwright came downstairs. He shut the door of the room silently and stood by the fireplace. She knew by his silence that something had happened. She sat with the white cat on her lap but she did not get up.

'Mother has gone,' he said.

She did not speak. He stood pitifully looking down at her, spreading out his white trembling shopkeeper's hands.

'Aren't you going to say something?'

She stroked the white cat with her hands, not speaking.

'Aren't you going to say anything? Aren't you going to say you're sorry?'

She still did not speak. She went on stroking the cat and she was not sorry. Now the tyranny and the domination and the old-fashioned ways and the stupidity were at an end, and she was simply glad that they were at an end.

The following year the Great War began. Already the shop had extended a little. Already the young Mrs. Cartwright had had her first experience in buying property.



She enjoyed buying the shop next door. It was a narrow one-windowed shop kept by a single lady who sold confectionery and newspapers, and it was bought against the wishes of Cartwright. 'Why do we want to extend? We can't turn Miss Sturgess out, either. That would be wrong.'

'There are plenty of places for a person like Miss Sturgess. Evensford is full of Miss Sturgesses. That's what it's made of.'

She enjoyed all that summer. She enjoyed the feeling of destroying a tiny piece of Evensford and putting herself in its place. She felt that it was the first time she had been happy in Evensford. She liked the feeling of being strong enough, and free enough, and having money enough, to put into execution a tiny section of a dream.

All the time, as she tried to change the shop, Cartwright was trying to preserve it as he had known it. Every change obscured by a fraction the memory of his mother. His life was measured now by the life she had governed. 'When mother was alive,' he would say. 'Mother always used to say. It was mother's way of doing things.'

She did not tell him that she felt angry about this. She did not say that she thought it foolish, that she despised it or that it made her impatient. She only said, one day in the second year of the war: 'You seem so restless. Is it the war? Do you feel you ought to be doing something?'

'You think I ought to go?' he said.

'You have to do what you think.'

'I don't know what to think,' he said. 'Sometimes I think it right and sometimes I think it wrong.'

'You only have to do what you think is right.'

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'I wonder what mother would have thought,' he said. 'I wonder.'

'It would have been different if she had been alive and she was the only one to be left,' she said. 'But I shall be all right. I'm young. You know you can leave me and I will be all right.'

'Are you sure?' he said. 'I would rather volunteer than be made to go.'

'I would like you to volunteer,' she said. 'I'd like that too. It's better.'

So at the end of the second year of the war Cartwright volunteered, and in the evenings, after the shop was closed, she was completely alone in the shop except for the maid in the kitchen and the white cat lying curled in the chair once occupied by the elder Mrs. Cartwright and later by Cartwright himself. There was nothing for her to do now except read and sometimes play the piano, and think. Twice and sometimes three times a week she walked in the evenings to the public library. One or two people spoke to her on her way. The librarian said, 'Good evening.' But no one stopped with her. She walked silently round the shelves in the library, choosing her books. The books were frowsy and tattered. Then she walked back to the shop and sat alone again, reading, sometimes with the cat on her lap. She was alone, but not lonely, and sometimes she ceased being absorbed by the book and looked up and stared into space, the grey eyes absorbed by calculation. She dreamed once again of how, after the war, the shop would grow, how completely she would revolutionize it, how it would become the foremost shop in Evensford. It did not trouble her that she had no friends or children. The shop was the only friend she needed. She would see it grow up like a child.

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It did not trouble her very much when, in the fourth year of the war, Cartwright was killed. She did not cry. Miss Johnson and Miss Dickins, the elderly assistants, again annoyed her by crying a great deal. But Miss Johnson and Miss Dickins were, she thought, old now. They belonged to the past phases of the shop. It was time, too, for them to go. 'Or you may stay on for less money,' she said. So the two elderly, now grey-haired women stayed on for the remaining year of the war for less money than the Cartwrights had paid them for ten years. They lived in lodgings together; the war food was bad and they did not eat enough. They had feeble, quiet, courteous voices and they remembered the dresses and hats and materials that customers had bought over many years, and so customers liked to be served by them again and again. 'But a business is a business,' the young Mrs. Cartwright said. 'There comes a time when we have to make changes. The two elderly assistants cried again and Miss Dickins said, 'We have been here for twenty years. There is nowhere else for us. Nowhere. Nowhere now.'

When they had gone at last not only the customers but the travellers missed Miss Dickins and Miss Johnson. The travellers liked a joke with the two shy elderly ladies behind the counter. It had become part of the tradition of the house. It was like the ceremonious procedure of giving an order. For many years the travellers had been invited into the Cartwrights' living-room behind the shop, and they looked forward to coming there and staying there, talking and showing their samples over a piece of ginger cake and a cup of tea. Now they were terrified by the young Mrs. Cartwright.

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'Yes, I know we've been buying it at six-three. But you can come down.'

'I don't see how I can, Mrs. Cartwright.'

'Oh! very well. Either you want the order or you don't want it. That's your affair. I'll say good afternoon.'

'Wait a minute, Mrs. Cartwright, wait a minute.'

'I'm rather tired of waiting minutes.'

'Yes, but - we've always dealt with you fairly, Mrs. Cartwright - we've - I'll tell you what - I'll make it six. That's a big drop. I oughtn't to do it on my own, Mrs. Cartwright, but -'

'All right. A hundred dozen at six.'

'All right, Mrs. Cartwright, yes.'

'As June 1st.'

'But that's three months, Mrs. Cartwright!'

'I'm quite aware of it. Otherwise I shouldn't say so.'

She liked the feeling of victory over the travellers. They began by being so buoyant; they ended by being so cast-down. She despised the old soft way of doing business: the cup of tea, the cake and the courtesies, the gossip, the shaken hand. She sat now behind the office desk, cold, rather stern, more dominant than the old Mrs. Cartwright had ever been; and got from the experience of beating down a tired commercial traveller by a farthing a feeling of concealed exultation. She got something of the same feeling every afternoon as she walked to the bank with the day's takings. She walked down to the bank every afternoon at the same time, carrying the black cash-bag. It would be just before three in the afternoon and the street would be fairly crowded. She knew that people watched her. She wanted them to watch her. She liked and hated

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the curious looks of inquisitive unfriendliness on their faces. And she knew too that they hated her because they did not know her. She knew that a little town hates everyone whose business it does not know.

At the bank they gave her all the courtesy due to a growing account. But she felt that the cashiers were snobs and that they too hated her. So she enjoyed raising her voice at them and making them jump. She liked querying a figure or demanding a pass-book late in the afternoon, when the bank was closing. She began to like more and more the feeling of power and exultation that money gave. When the books she got from the library were not what she wanted she liked to go into the office and check over and dream over the figures in the ledgers. She would be alone except for the white cat curled on the floor at her feet, and there would be no sound except the gas hissing in the burner over the desk. She liked to go back over the years and see how the business had grown. It had begun with a capital of ten pounds and in the first year the Cartwrights were happy because they made a profit of a pound a week from the sale of buttons on cards, ribbons, hat trimmings, shirt flannel and such things. The needs of Evensford were simple then. Now the turnover of the business was, in spite of war, practically five thousand a year, and it had not really begun to grow as she knew it could grow. The needs of Evensford might have been simple once; she had seen to it that they were no longer so simple.

As she sat there one evening, going over the accounts in the gaslight, she did not notice that the white cat was not in the room. The war was over now; the papers were talking loudly about an era of reconstruction. She had been in Evensford ten years; she was

thirty-three; much had happened. But it was nothing, she thought, to what was going to happen. An era of reconstruction was right: her own reconstruction, the reconstruction of the shop. The reconstruction of the world outside did not matter.

As she sat there she began to hear, above the hissing of the gas, another sound. She lifted her head and listened. She heard the sound of the cat crying gently somewhere beyond the window.

She got up and went out of the side-door into the alley-way. The cat was trying to crawl on its belly by the wall. It was crying with pain. She picked it up in her arms and took it from the dark alley-way into the house. It was sick in her hands as she carried it. Her heart was beating very fast with the shock of the discovery: the first time she had ever felt it beating like that since she had been in Evensford.

She washed her hands of the sickness and then washed the face of the cat with warm water. It lay in her arms, not moving for some time. Suddenly it gave violent spasmodic jerks and began to cry feebly. It jerked violently again and fell out of her lap, beating its head on the floor. She picked it up and hugged it desperately to her. She felt slightly hysterical and did not know what to do. Every time the poison lacerated the cat with pain she felt a sudden laceration inside herself. For the first time she discovered that the sufferings of another creature could hurt her terribly. As the bitter and difficult tears came into her eyes she felt more and more helpless. The cat struggled more violently. 'Oh, please! Oh, please!' she said. 'Oh, please! Please God, don't let it suffer.'

She carried the cat round and round the room in her arms like a sick child, crying bitterly, feeling more and

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more helpless, knowing less and less what to do. Then she carried it upstairs and lay down on the bed with it, as she had done on her first night in Evensford and had done so many times since. Every time the cat struggled in her arms she felt the anguish of it tearing her own body into thin raw strips of pain.

'Oh, please, please don't let it! Please, God don't let it suffer. Please let it die. Please. Please, God don't let it live and suffer.'

She lay there all night with the cat in her arms. After it died she did not get up and she did not sleep, but simply lay staring in the darkness. She forgot the unlocked safe and the doors she always so carefully locked downstairs. She forgot the ledgers and the accounts and the money. They all seemed suddenly of little importance now.

She did not get over the pain of the cat's death for quite a long time. It became part of a new kind of hatred for Evensford: as if Evensford itself had deliberately poisoned the only thing for which she cared.

She felt very lonely too. She began to get more easily angry with people. Miss Dickins and Miss Johnson had gone. Now, one by one, she found some excuse to get rid of the other assistants. She walked round the shop like a woman with an invisible dagger in her hands. She hated the giggling, whispering, dowdy girls behind the counters. She wanted to stick the dagger into someone. She hated more and more the dead little town.

The shop next door was owned by a couple named Jordan, who sold confectionery and toys. Old Mrs. Jordan suffered from asthma and sometimes you could

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hear the agony of her coughing in the front bedroom above the shop. Mr. Jordan treated her with great care and took her away to Bournemouth for a fortnight every summer. Both Mr. and Mrs. Jordan were thin and small, and when they walked out together they looked as if they were propping each other up. The impression was that when one went away the other would fall down.

That summer, the second after the war, Mr. Jordan did not take Mrs. Jordan to the sea. She died on a hot stifling day in August. She fought in vain and in agony for her breath in the sweltering little bedroom that lay low under the rafters of the old-fashioned shop. After her death old Mr. Jordan walked about as if he were leaning on the air and would fall over. 'She couldn't get her breath,' he kept saying. 'If only she could have got her breath. If only she could have got her breath.'

The Jordans were typical of Evensford. They did as everyone else did. Every Sunday morning Mr. Jordan took a small batter pudding, in a flat baking tin, to be cooked in the bakehouse round the corner. In the centre of the yellow batter was a small piece of red beef, and on the beef was a ticket, pinned by a long, blue-headed pin, to say whose pudding it was. While the meat and the pudding were cooking Mr. and Mrs. Jordan went to church. Mr. Jordan always took the pudding at twenty-five minutes to eleven. He was always very punctual, so that people going to church knew they were not late if they saw Mr. Jordan with the pudding.

After Mrs. Jordan's death he did not take the pudding. It was as if he no longer had any interest in keeping alive. The day of Mrs. Jordan's death he



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pinned a written notice on the shop door. 'Temp. closed owing to decease of partner.' It remained there a fortnight.

Towards the end of the fortnight Mrs. Cartwright called on Mr. Jordan. She called at the back door of the house. She was met by a Mr. Jordan she had never seen before. He had not shaved and his hair was uncombed and his eyes were choked with dried yellow lumps of matter. His tongue hung out a little and the nails of his hands were long and black.

He peered at her blindly through the crack of the door.

'Uh?' he said.

'I came to see how you were,' she said. 'I came to see you about something.'

'Uh?'

'I came to talk to you about something.'

'Me? You want me? Uh?'

'Could I come in?'

Mr. Jordan opened the door very slowly and let her in. In the living-room the cloth was dirty on the table. Dirty cups and plates, bread and jam, old newspapers were scattered about it. Mr. Jordan made an attempt to pile the dirty cups and plates together, and then gave it up. He looked as if he were going to fall down.

'Uh? Want to see me, uh?' he said.

'Mr. Jordan,' she said, 'you haven't opened the shop. Aren't you going to open it? Perhaps you're not going to keep it on?'

'Uh?' he said.

'The shop,' she said. She tried to explain carefully. She was irritated by the stupidity of an old man who seemed unable to think. The house made her sick. She hated the sour stale smell of the greasy table. She

had no patience with the old yellow eyes and the dirty trembling hands.

'If you're not going to keep it on,' she said. 'I would buy it.'

'Uh?'

'I would buy it,' she said. She tried to explain carefully again. She was irritated because she did not know whether his head was nodding or trembling. 'You need a rest,' she said. 'I'd make you a good offer if you'd sell.'

'Sell?'

'I'll offer you five hundred for the freehold, and another hundred for the stock.'

'Uh?'

He kept staring emptily at her with yellow watery eyes. She grew more and more irritated. She hated the dirty greasy little room and the smell of cheap sweets, warm and stale, that came from beyond the bead curtain in the doorway leading to the shop: just another piece of Evensford, dead, stupid, out of date. It was dead and she would tear it down.

'It's a good offer,' she said.

'She couldn't get her breath,' he said.

She wanted to strike the old stupefied face into understanding. 'It's a good offer,' she said. 'Don't you understand?'

She stayed there all afternoon. She knew that he did not understand. He did not seem to care about time or understanding or even the shop. Only once he asked, as if it were an established fact that she would buy:

'You goin' keep it on like it is? Sweets and that? Good trade, you know. Sometimes we -'

'Yes,' she said. 'Yes. I'll keep it on.'

'Like it is, uh?'

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'Yes,' she said. 'Like it is.'

'Long as I know that,' he said, 'it's all right.'

She felt that he had no understanding of what it was all about. She made her promises to him with grey steady eyes full of calculation. She smoothed her gloves with her fingers and then bent the fingers and admired the smoothed tight hands.

In three days she had bought the shop. In three or four weeks the builders were pulling it down. She liked to stand outside and watch the raw hole growing wider in the street. She liked the idea of the clean autumn wind driving through the gap. Above all she liked the clean feeling in herself. She felt renewed and happier. Even the cat did not seem to matter. She thought more and more of herself now.

In a year or two the shop as the Cartwrights had known it was no longer there. The front was lengthened; wide windows opened to a circular arcade, where people could shelter from the rain. Upstairs there was a café. Every two months the young Mrs. Cartwright, already looking not quite so young, presented Evensford with a mannequin parade, and served tea and coffee and cakes without charge. She illuminated the windows at night, after the shop was shut. She kept the light burning until most of Evensford had gone to bed. Inside, the old system of dusty boxes on shelves had gone; and the pine staircase; and the clanking clumsy overhead railway for the cash. Gradually she had torn out the dark, dusty, ugly insides of the place. What now remained was select, cool, rather aloof: the expression of herself. The paint was bright and hard. You walked on soft carpets that were without friendliness.

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During the time and for the next ten years she worked very hard. She liked work. She liked acquiring something, changing it, effacing the recollection of what it had been. It became almost a mania with her to buy property everywhere in Evensford. Whenever there was a property sale she was there; she sat at the back of the auction room, too conspicuous for Evensford, too well dressed, very alone, very aloof, not moving except for a flicker of her pencil as she raised the bidding. She bought mostly shops; after that rows of working-class houses in the poorer parts of the town. She bought and then waited. She waited and then, on some trivial excuse, put up the rent. She liked that too. She liked the feeling of power: the deliberate, cool, unpleasant power of imposing herself on a town that did not want her.

She had been in Evensford more than thirty years when she bought a row of houses in Warren Street, a section of the town between the railway and the river. They were the sort of houses that made up more than half the streets of Evensford: flat, grim red little boxes fronting straight on to the street. The long flat frontage was split open by recurrent entries. The backyards, filled with dirty hen-runs and water-butts and clothes-lines, were out of the sun.

She began to go every Friday to Warren Street, as she went to all the other houses she owned in Evensford, to collect the rent. In most houses the rent-money lay ready for her on the rent-book on the kitchen table. She knocked on the back door, went in, and took up the rent. She counted the money, signed the book and came out again. Sometimes people did not speak to her. She hated this feeling of hostility as she hated the overcrowded back-kitchens, with the

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washing drying under the ceiling and the men washing at the sinks and the mangle in the corner and the dirty roller towel on the door. She hated the stale smell of boiled onions and boot polish and drying napkins. She hated every part of the mean, fusty, overcrowded life.

In Warren Street the people were new to her. She did not know them. Yet she might have known them for ever. They were a replica of all the people in all the streets she had ever known in the town.

It was not until the third rent day that she found any difference in Warren Street. She went into the kitchen of Number 8 and at the table a man of about thirty was reading a book. •

'Yes?' he said.

'I've called for the rent,' she said.

'I don't know anything about it,' he said. 'I only lodge here.'

'Wasn't it left? It's always left.'

'If it had been left,' he said, 'it would have been here.'

The man had black, direct, rather mocking eyes. He held his head in his hands as he read. His black hair fell in his hands. The book was on the table. He moved his head stiffly upwards as he spoke.

'You read a lot?' she said.

'Quite a lot.'

As if to say, 'What has it to do with you?'

'I'm afraid you'll find no bookshop in Evensford.'

'I found the library.'

'That place?'

'That place,' he said.

'The books have all been there for years. Filthy. Out of date. I thought nobody ever went there now. It should have been pulled down long ago.'

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'Like some of the houses,' he said.

'What did you say?'

'You don't like Evensford, do you?' he said.

'How do you know?'

He looked at her, black eyes mocking but calm, sharp elbows jabbed against the table, chin forward.

'I can tell what people like and what they don't like.'

'You can?' she said. 'Well, do you like Evensford?'

'It's as good as any other working town.'

'Which means?'

'Which means the working people live where they work and lump the place if they don't like it.'

'But you? You can read anywhere?'

'I can read anywhere.'

'You read quickly,' she said, 'don't you?'

'I read pretty quickly.'

'You'll soon exhaust the poor little library at Evensford if you go too often.'

'Think so?' he said. 'I hear there's five thousand books. Three times a week and I'll still be a long time.'

'You will.'

'I will,' he said.

He looked at her steadily for a moment as if to say, 'Have you finished with me?' and then, after a moment or two, she left. She left without asking any more about the rent and he did not get up from the table. Going down the backyards of the houses she found herself trembling. No one had ever talked to her like that.

To be interested in someone, to talk to someone, to feel her interest in life filtering out beyond the shop: this was new. It produced in her a feeling of rather troubled excitement.

She went to the library on the following evening and

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on the evening after that, but the man from Warren Street was not there. The library was in the old Church Rooms, where huge red cards marked 'Silence' were placed on pale grim walls above the dark shelves of books, and the quarter strokes of the church clock, very near outside, beat down into the silence regularly. It was summer and the evenings were light outside, but inside, between the dark shelves, a gas-lamp burned above the books. At the entrance the librarian sat behind a pigeon-hole. The door into the shelves was opened by a foot spring, and until she worked it you could not get in or out. When she worked it the door slammed shut behind you with a loud explosion in the silence, and it was as if you were in a trap.

Mrs. Cartwright came away from the library, and went again, as if she were trapped: as if suddenly, completely without warning and for the first time, she were trapped by something outside herself and not of her own responsibility. At the shop she went to bed with the books she had borrowed. She did not even look at them. She lay and watched the light of the street-lamp on the ceiling and thought of the annoyance, the calm and the sharp white elbows of the man in Warren Street. 'I can tell what people like and what they don't like,' she remembered.

Did he also know what people were thinking and feeling? What she was thinking and feeling? It occurred to her suddenly that he might have stayed away from the library because he really did know what she thought and felt and might do. 'I won't go again,' she thought.

The following evening she stayed in the room behind the shop until after nine o'clock. The library closed at ten. She felt very restless. She tried for a

time to play the piano. Finally she went out of the back door and down to the library as the church clock was striking half-past nine.

She did not know what to say to the man from Warren Street, who stood in the library under the gaslight, turning over the books. She felt more than ever as if she were trapped. Her eyes looked filmy and uncertain and had lost their look of calculation

'Well?' he said. 'I thought nobody ever came here.'

'I come.'

'Often?'

'When I want something new.'

He put the book back on the shelf.

'What sort of things do you read?' she said.

'Detective stuff.'

'Only that?'

'Mostly that. Keeps me excited.'

'Life isn't very exciting for a stranger here, is it?'

'I told you it's like any working-class town,' he said.

'Pubs, pictures, chapels, shops. You ought to know. You've lived here. You're part of it.'

'Part of it? Me? You can live here and be a stranger.'

He picked up another book, glanced at her and turned over the pages.

'Why don't you go somewhere else if you don't like it?' he said.

'Somewhere else?'

'You've got money. You've got nothing to keep you. People let themselves get too complicated. All you've got to do is get up some morning and say "I've finished with this. I'll start afresh. Somewhere else." '

'Where?'

'Anywhere you like better.'

'Alone?'



He did not answer.

'Are you happy?' she said. 'I mean here? In a town like this?'

'I'm all right. I'm happy,' he said. 'I don't want much. I've got my job. I'm all right.'

She felt she had nothing to say. It was almost ten o'clock. They talked in very low voices. It was twilight beyond the windows and the librarian was packing up her papers.

'Haven't you got a book?' he said.

'Not yet. If you wait I'll get one.'

'It's closing time,' he said. 'Hadh't you better get one quickly?'

She took a book from the shelves, hurriedly, at random, not knowing what it was. 'We can go now,' she said.

'We?' He glanced at her, sideways, mocking a little.

'You could go my way. It's partly on your way.'

'Partly?' He had a way of smiling and then closing his eyes. The dark lids, pulled too smoothly down, seemed instantaneously to curl upward the too smooth full lips. When he opened his eyes again the smile remained for a moment or two fixed, softly ironical. It seemed to magnetize her.

They walked down the street in the darkening air: the hideous little street, with the flat brick houses, the boot-shop next to the library, the slaughter-house opposite, the tea-shop with the fly-blown cakes in the window, the youths sprawling against the pillar-box on the corner. She did not notice any of it now. Before, coming alone from the library, she had always been conscious of the young men at the corner, looking her up and down. She had caught the faint odour of the slaughter-house, the smell of the stale cooking-fat

from the little café. She had held her breath as she passed the people of Evensford coming up the High Street, late from the cinemas, fish-and-chips in their hands. She had felt her breath sour into a lump of sickness in her throat. She walked down the street now as if none of it existed.

In her own shop, in the new bright windows, the light was burning. The dresses on the models were like splashes of flower-light in the dark street. She stopped by the window. She gazed for a moment at the sharp clean light cast across the dusty summer pavement, the dirty gutter, the oil-stained roadway that shone like polished iron. She felt for a moment proud of it: her light, the light of an achievement. It looked smart and positive and fashionable. It had taken her many years to achieve that white clean glare across the pavement. She wished that he would notice it too.

He stood looking down the street, hatless, his black eyes rather sleepy and indifferent, as if he did not know she was there.

‘Wouldn’t you come in?’ she said.

‘It’s late for you.’

‘Oh, no! Oh, no! It really isn’t.’

‘Well –’

She found her latch-key and unlocked the door in the alley-way. She switched on the light in the passage inside and the old heavy smell of drapery was thick in the closed house. She switched on the light in the drawing-room and called him to come in. She was struck suddenly by the awful emptiness of the place. How long had it been since she had asked anyone into that room? How did she come to live here alone? She felt the loneliness of years, broken suddenly, stream down through her body in a cold shiver of excitement.

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Her hands were damp as she wiped them across her face.

'I don't know if you'd like something to eat,' she said.

'Oh, no!'

'A drink or something? An orange? Have something please.'

'Oh, well, an orange,' he said.

'They're nice,' she said. 'I got them today. They're very nice. Take a good one.'

He sat on the sofa and took an orange from the dish on the table at his side. He rolled it in his hands, using the palms of his hands. His fingers were long and white and straight. They stood away from the orange, almost insolent. There was something about their sleekness which kept her fascinated. It was very foolish, but it was as if he were going to do a conjuring trick and suddenly the orange would disappear and he would look up at her, with the lids of his eyes smoothly drawn down and the smooth ironical smile on his face, and say, 'You see? — simple. Very simple. Quite simple. You see?' All the time she sat fascinated and yet, in a way, hating it. All the time she felt the loneliness of years, dispelled, running through her body in excitement.

'What do you do in Evensford?' she said. 'What does a person like you come to be doing here?'

'I'm a teacher.' The smile spread slowly over his face. 'Train the child in the way it should go.'

He began to peel the orange. She saw the fine spray of juice squirt up from the pressure of his thumb on the skin.

'You'll ruin your suit,' she said.

'Suit?' he said. 'What with? — oh, that's nothing.'

'Nonsense,' she said. 'I'll get you a serviette. It's all over you.'

She went out of the room and brought back the serviette. She unrolled it and spread it on his knees. It seemed suddenly to her like an act of familiarity. It pleased her to do it, to give part of herself in service. He smiled a little, mocking, and let the golden sections of peel fall on the white cloth. Then he broke the orange in his fingers, and then broke the parts again. Then he began to eat it, taking the pips out of his mouth and holding them in his hands. He held them and looked at her, sideways, eyes half closed.

'There's a look on your face like the look of a small boy,' she said.

'Doing what?'

'Waiting.'

They looked at each other for a second or two, not speaking.

'Waiting for what?' he said at last.

'For the chance of doing something to somebody who isn't looking.'

He smiled ironically again.

'The pips?'

'The pips,' Mrs. Cartwright said.

'Really?'

'Yes, really,' she said. 'As if you didn't know.'

She saw him rubbing the oily-wet orange pips in the tips of his slender fingers, and the gleam of juice on his hands. There was a look in his eyes of tender mockery as he looked straight at her.

'Dare me to,' he said.

'Just like a small boy?'

'Dare me to.'

'You daren't do it as a man. You want me to dare

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you to do it as a small boy. And then you dare do it, daren't you?"

'Just dare me,' he said.

'How old are you, playing with orange pips?"

'Twenty-five.'

'Just a small boy.'

'Dare me,' he said very softly. He rolled the orange pips slowly in the tips of his fingers. 'Dare me.'

They sat looking at each other for perhaps another thirty seconds, half smiling, waiting for each other.

'What will you do if I dare you?" she said.

'Dare me.'

'All right,' she said, as if she had suddenly become young and careless and stupid and utterly irresponsible for the first time in her life. 'Since you want me to.' She began to laugh now as she spoke. 'I dare you to.'

He squirted the first pip at her, from between the finger-tips, almost before she had finished speaking. She shrieked a little as it flew past her face. He shot another, and she picked up a cushion and held it in front of her face, and then she heard other pips bouncing on the cushion. 'I can see a lot of you besides your face,' he said.

'Oh, no, please, not my dress!'

She felt the pips begin to strike her body. They struck her softly on the breast and on the bare arms, and they fell in her lap. She tried to pick them up so that the juice should not stain her dress, but the cushion fell as she did so and he began to shoot the pips again at her face. She was laughing and panting and she felt quite foolish and for some reason partly annoyed and partly happy. One of the pips struck her on the face and she begged him to stop. 'You dared me to,' he said. 'You know you dared me.'

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'Yes, I know, but stop now.'

'You don't want me to stop,' he said. 'You like it. You're laughing.'

'Yes, I know, but stop.'

'You're laughing so much there are tears in your eyes.'

She lay back in her chair, looking at him through the soft film of tears brought on by laughter, her mouth open and her breath panting quietly through it, her hands loosely grasping the cushion to her body.

'Oh, dear! Oh, God!' she said. 'I haven't laughed so much for years.'

He looked at her casually, smiling silently, eyes half closed.

'Oh! it was really awfully silly,' she said.

She smoothed her dress awkwardly with her hands. He did not move. She patted her hands against her hair.

'Awfully silly,' she said. 'Awfully silly.'

'You dared me,' he said.

'Yes, I know. But you looked so like a small boy.'

She looked up at him, tenderly, but the expression on his face did not change. She suddenly felt embarrassed before the casual, ironical, almost pitying glance. The last of the orange had gone, and still looking at her he took his handkerchief and wiped his lips, then his fingers and then his lips again. Her embarrassment did not bring them any closer together. The expression on his face remained exactly the same: as if he were faintly amused by the sight of a woman of fifty panting with shyness, excitement and laughter.

'Well, I must go,' he said.

'Must you?'

'I think so. I really think so.'

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He got up from the sofa, stretching his arms. She felt awkward and shy. She held her hands together and then dropped them by her sides.

'You'll come in again?'

'Well - '

'Do you play the piano?'

'I don't.'

'You could come to tea.'

'Some day,' he said.

She did not know what else to say. She walked with him to the door. She opened it and felt the night air cool on her face. The street outside was very quiet. She longed suddenly to walk down the dark streets, without her hat, to the other end of the town, and walk back alone and think of what had happened. She waited for a moment or two in silence, wanting him to speak. She wanted him to say how nice it had been, to be polite, to say thank you. He stood with his hands in his pockets, the book pressed under his arm. She could not see his face very clearly, but she felt she knew just how calm and careless it was. She hated it and was hurt by it at the same time.

'Good night,' she said. 'I hope you'll come in again. I do hope so.'

'Night,' he said.

He walked down the alley-way and into the street before she had time to speak again.

She shut the door and latched it and slowly walked upstairs. She sat down on the bed. Her hands were trembling. The light of the shop had been automatically switched out and the room was dark. She felt her loneliness, dispelled momentarily by the foolish behaviour downstairs, come back again. She lifted her trembling hands to her face, to comfort herself,

and smelled the stale sweet odour of oranges on them still.

'Why do I live in Warren Street?' he said. 'I thought you'd want to know that.'

He lay stretched on the sofa, his feet up. He had come to tea at last, on a Sunday. It was past the end of the summer.

'Why do you?' she said. 'You – living in that street.'

'You own it,' he said.

'But that's different.'

'Different? How is it different? You own it and I live in it – for the same reason.' He looked at her steadily, nonchalantly. 'Suppose I want money too? The cheaper I live the more I save.'

'Money? What good will money do you?'

'You ought to know,' he said.

'Yes, but you're young,' she said. 'You've got life. You don't need money.'

He looked at her, not smiling now.

'We lived in Birmingham,' he said. 'My father was a brass-foundry hand. There were eight of us. Brought up on thirty bob a week. Don't talk to me about not wanting money. I know what it is to want it. To want it terribly and not to get it. I know.'

'It isn't everything.'

'No,' he said, 'but it'll do as a substitute until I find something better.'

'That's awful talk,' she said.

'Awful?'

'To hear you say that – it's awful. You're young. Don't you ever think of anything else – friends, home, career, that sort of thing?'

'They'll come,' he said.



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He reached out and took a cake from the table standing between the settee and her chair. He bit into it and took a mouthful of tea, washing it down. He wiped one hand across his mouth. She hated suddenly the nonchalant ill-manners, the cocksureness, the bright black eyes and their flash of superciliousness.

'I know what I want,' he said.

She sat staring at him. She felt she despised what he said and yet she was fascinated by the voice which said it. As she sat watching him she found herself gradually becoming oblivious of the words he used.

All the time she was troubled by his neck-tie. The knot was loose and did not reach the collar of his shirt. She felt an extraordinary desire to knot it tightly. It needed a little invisible pin underneath it in order to keep it tight. It needed to be tied in just such a way that it would never loosen. She sat for a long time staring at it, knotting and re-knotting it in her imagination, her hand fretful and her ears oblivious to what he was saying, until she could bear it no longer.

She suddenly got up and went over to him and knelt by the sofa. She tried to make fun of what she was doing but her hands were trembling.

'Come here, do,' she said. 'Your tie is an awful sight.'

'Oh, my tie's all right,' he said. 'It's all right.'

'It isn't all right. It's awful. Just look at it. It's awful.'

He fingered it irritably.

'Don't touch it!' she said.

'Then why must *you* touch it?'

'Because it looks awful. It's loose and you look a disgrace. Hold up your head.'

'God!' he said.

She began to tie the neck-tie softly and slowly, with

a kind of finicky tenderness. He held his head away from her, irritated. She tied the neck-tie once and then undid it and began to tie it again.

'For heaven's sake,' he said.

'No,' she said, 'hold still. Please hold still. Just for a moment. Please.'

Her hands were close under his throat, the fabric of the tie was smooth and soft. She found herself enjoying a sensation of immense satisfaction. It seemed to her that she had discovered for the first time the pleasure of doing a little thing for another person.

'Must you do this?' he said.

She went on knotting the tie, kneeling down before him. To do something for him, however small and however foolish, seemed suddenly an important thing. She leaned back and looked at the tie with warmth and pleasure in her eyes.

'Satisfied?' he said.

'Oh, please,' she said. 'Just one more second. Then it'll be perfect - ' She stretched out her hands.

'Oh, God!' he said.

'Please,' she said. 'Please. Just one moment. It's almost right. Be a good boy.'

'Boy!' he said. 'Boy! Is that all you think of me? Perhaps you'd like to brush my hair and clean my nails too?'

'I'd do even that,' she said.

'Oh, you women!' he said. 'You women.'

'All of us?' she said. 'Or only me?'

She leaned back on her knees, smiling, her eyes alight, teasing him.

'Oh! I don't know,' he said. 'I - '

'Now you're offended,' she said.

He got up suddenly from the sofa, leaving her there

on her knees. He walked about the room, pulling his tie.

'Please don't be offended,' she said.

'Who's offended? Who's offended?'

'Don't be angry.'

'Who said I was angry?'

'Don't be angry any more.'

'I'm not angry!' he shouted. 'I just don't want to be fussed by you. I don't want to be touched by you. I've got something better to do than be fooled about by someone old enough to be my mother!'

She did not speak and she did not raise herself up from her knees. She sat staring at him as if she did not believe what he had said. Her mind felt wooden with pain and she was only half aware of him going out of the room, furiously banging the door of the hall, and of the abrupt and painful silence of the house.

That night she wrote a letter to him and went out, very late, to post it at the letter-box on the corner. It was raining and cold and the summer now seemed finally over. 'Please forgive me,' she said. 'Perhaps what I did seemed very foolish to you. It was not meant like that. Send me a word to say you don't think too badly of me. Just a word. It isn't much. It's a little thing.'

Autumn came on with cold gales of rain that brought down and flattened wetly on the pavement the brown leaves of the street trees. She waited for an answer to the letter, but there was no answer.

She continued to go down to the library, borrowing books she never read, two and three and sometimes four evenings a week, all that autumn and on into the winter. The young man from Warren Street was

never at the library; she did not meet him in the street or when she collected the rent. She went to the library with the almost automatic hope that one evening she would grasp the handle of the glass swing-doors on one side, and he the other, and that each of them would try to pull the doors open and there would be a moment of deadlock before they smiled at each other through the glass. After that he would come to tea again. She would fuss round him and pour his tea and give him a serviette to wipe his fingers. It would be all right and she would be happy. She would be happy because for the first time for thirty years she was giving something to someone and not taking it away. Her eyes, as she stared at the books in the dim light of the library, had lost their look of calculation. When she thought of him she was struck by the incalculable force of little things: the pips of an orange, a neck-tie, a serviette. She thought of Cartwright, the elder Mrs. Cartwright, the faded assistants of the shop, all dead now, from whom she had never had a moment of life that she herself had not calculated. None of them had left a fragrance of orange on her hands. None of them had ever filled more than a fraction of her life. She had been able to calculate their lives in relation to her own. She had almost been able to calculate the way they would die. When she lay awake at night and listened to the sounds of the trees and the feet in the street below, she was listening, in reality, to her own thoughts — always how she would acquire something, change it, progress a little further, calculate a little more. Now when she heard the last of the autumn leaves flapping wetly on the branches it was as if they fell damply and with monotony into the emptiness of her own mind. She lay awake all the nights of that

autumn and listened to the leaves with an empty agony, and sometimes because she could not sleep she got up and stood by the window and pressed her head against the cold glass and listened to the rain streaming wildly down the cold face of the window as if it were her own infinite tears falling for the things she could not describe.

What she wanted now was very simple. To be given something, and not to take it, to be given not even affection but only the means of expressing it. She wanted something at last that she could not buy: the privacy, the privilege, the affection of another life. Was it, she thought, very much to ask?

On the evenings when she did not go to the library she sat in the room behind the shop. She would sit staring at the fire and, staring, forget to make it up. She would get up and wander nervously about the room, stopping to touch the notes of the piano. Her shoulders felt cold. She did not want to eat. She remembered the time when she had not wanted to come close to Evensford and when she knew that no one in Evensford would ever trouble her.

Finally, because she could bear it no longer, she wrote another letter. 'I would like to try and explain a little what I feel. I hoped I would see you again. I know you were angry that day but there is no need to be angry. It isn't easy to explain what I feel. You must know that people grow fond of other people for the most unlikely reasons, and in a way that is the trouble. If I knew why I was fond of you it would be very simple. But I don't know. I just know that when I first saw you I felt differently from the way I'd ever felt about anyone before. I just don't know any other reason. I just want to sit with you and do things for

you and talk to you and know that you like me. It isn't easy to explain. Perhaps it seems rather silly at my age to be saying this. Perhaps I ought not to say it. I don't know. It doesn't matter. I am writing this because it is so much easier to write it than to say it, and it does seem sometimes as if I shall never see you again. You are very young, but can you see what I mean? I know that one often can't be bothered to understand when one is young. But if you can understand, will you come to see me — please, some time? Please, will you? You needn't stay long, and you needn't ever come again. But if you come I shall know that you understand.'

She wrote the letter at the close of the year. She had spent Christmas alone and the weather was very cold. Early snow turned to black slush in the streets and then froze again into crusts of black ice. The wind blew bitterly up the valley from the sea, and there were not many people at the library in the evenings. Mrs. Cartwright felt the cold and wrapped a big brown woollen scarf over her head and tied it under her chin. It was colder than the days when the elder Mrs. Cartwright had died. She wore an old fur coat because it was lined and warm. In the darkness it did not matter much.

She waited a fortnight but there was no answer. She went to the library every evening without seeing the man from Warren Street. She walked up and down between the shelves in a state of great distress. She took out books from the shelves and put them back again. The big red notices on the walls seemed to stare painfully down at her. The door of the library clicked open and closed with an awful hollow sound like a trap.

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She went home alone every evening, wrapped against the cold in the big brown scarf and the old fur coat and went straight to bed. She knew now that there would be no answer. She began to feel now as she had done when the cat had died. She felt all the isolation of the years she had spent in Evensford narrow into a single prolonged experience of loneliness. Formerly she had not wanted the cat to suffer. Now she did not want to suffer herself.

When after three weeks there was no answer and it struck her finally that he might have gone away altogether, she got up out of bed one night and walked about the room in her bare feet, vaguely raising her hands to her face and letting them fall again. She felt all the emotions she had felt when the cat had died: the painful, difficult, blinding tears and the helplessness. She lay down on the bed and clutched the wooden bars of the bedstead with her hands and felt everything simplify into a moment of pure agony: the agony of knowing at last what was wrong and of knowing that nothing would put it right. To want someone and not be wanted: that was wrong. That was the explanation. 'Oh, God!' she said, 'Oh, God!' She muttered the words helplessly and vehemently, as she had done when the cat had died: the same words, out of the same despair. 'Oh, God, don't let me live and suffer!'

She went on the following day to collect the rent at Warren Street. Snow lay on the asphalt backyards in crusty frozen heaps, and ice on the water-barrels by the back doors. She tried to be calm as she walked from house to house. The wind was cold and beat her hair into her face untidily. The little backyards were treacherous and grim and bare and the cabbages were frozen in the gardens. She walked on the frozen snow

with small agitated steps, exactly as if she were frightened and trembling.

What she wanted had become more simple than ever. She wanted him simply to be there, in the house, reading at the table in the living-room with his sharp white elbows on the table and his cool eyes lifted to recognize her. She wanted him simply to exist. It was a very simple unextravagant thing to want and it seemed strange that she had lived in Evensford for more than thirty years before it should happen.

When she saw the table in the living-room empty except for the rent-book and the money lying on it she made a great effort to be calmer than ever.

'Has Mr. —, has your lodger gone?' she said. Her voice sounded stupid and false. She tried again. 'I mean — I —'

'Mr. West?'

'Mr. West,' she said.

'He's off to Birmingham again.'

'Again?'

'Been going there twice and three times a week this fortnight.'

'Working?'

'Working or playing, I don't know what you'd call it. Amounts to the same thing. Bringing his girl down and going to be married.'

'Here?'

'In the John Street Baptist next Thursday. They're coming back on the three train tomorrow.'

'That's very nice,' she said.

She walked out of the house and down the back-yards, over the frozen snow.

The afternoon train came in to Evensford at 3.13;



for over thirty years it had come in at about the same time. Walking down to the station on the following day, wearing the brown scarf folded high under her hat and the old fur coat that was too long by several inches for the style of that year, she remembered how she had first come on the train herself, a girl with a yellow dress-basket, and how much she had wanted Cartwright to meet her. No one had spoken to her that day as she walked up the High Street between the closed shops, in the rain, and now no one spoke to her today as she walked to the station in the snow. Fresh snow had fallen in the night and lay to a depth of three or four inches, light and pure, on the roofs. It was churned to dark ribbons of ice-slush in the High Street and padded black by feet on the pavement: but in the side streets and in the gardens of the houses and finally on the railway track itself it lay clean and untouched and pure too. The reflection of it was cast up into her face as she walked, her head bent slightly, so that her face looked dead white and frozen itself, her eyes like frosted glass. She had always been frightened of falling on the snow and she had put on a pair of big black goloshes that were a little too large for her. They made a slopping sound as she walked in the snow.

At the station no one but herself was waiting for the train. She did not feel very much as she stood there. It was cold to her feet and for a time she walked about and then finally she walked up and stood on the foot-bridge. Looking down the tracks she felt exactly the cold emptiness she saw there. The thin steel lines curved away on the pure white ground of snow and seemed to meet on the bare horizon. Her life seemed destined somehow to be bound up with the idiotic little

train. When she had first come in by it she had felt proud and aloof and very sure: very sure of herself and Cartwright, very sure she was the one and only Miss Cassell, very sure of what she wanted. Now she did not feel sure of herself, and what she wanted was so simple that it was quite ridiculous. It was like expecting the two railway lines actually to converge and become one at a given point; whereas you knew that they never could, never did and never would come the slightest fraction nearer to each other. Up the track the train would be coming in backwards; in the train were two people. She did not know one of them much; she did not know the other one at all. It was very ridiculous that it should make her feel as if her heart were broken up.

She ran one finger of her glove along the iron rim of the bridge. A little snow stuck to her glove and a little shower of it fell from the bridge. From the far side of the bridge three small boys ran up the steps and over the top and down the other side, laughing. They said something about the old woman but she did not hear it. At that moment the door of the stationmaster's office banged and the stationmaster came out on to the platform, stamping his feet in the snow, with a porter. There was very little luggage on the platform and no crates of pigeons. A moment or two later she saw the white smoke of the approaching train.

She stood there without moving as the train came in: three coaches, and the engine, as always, behind. It did not halt for more than a few moments. Looking down from the bridge she saw the young man from Warren Street get out of the train. He was carrying two suitcases, and with him was the young woman. Mrs. Cartwright saw the young woman look up. She

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looked rather excited and she smiled. It might have been herself arriving thirty years ago, looking up and getting her first sight of Evensford: except that there had then been no smile, no excitement and no one to meet her.

The train began to move out again, and a few moments later the platform was empty. She walked down from the bridge and round to the front of the station. She was just in time to see the man from Warren Street putting the two suitcases into the only taxi that met the trains at Evensford, and to hear him say, 'Oh, it's cold and miserable. Better to ride.' She heard the sound of the young woman's voice laughing in reply and then the crackling sound of the taxi wheels in the crisp air as they moved over the frozen snow. As she watched the taxi disappear, leaving the short street empty, she knew suddenly how simple the solution to everything was: to be loved and to be wanted, to want someone and be wanted, ever so little, in return. She was struck again by the awful force of little things: a taxi on a cold day in the snow, an empty street in a strange town in the rain.

She walked heavily down the street in the snow. She stared at her feet, absurdly floppy in the goloshes that were too big for them. Her face was practically hidden by the big untidy scarf and there were patches of snow on the fur coat where she had leaned against the bridge.

The three small boys who had run over the bridge waited for her as she came down the street. They crouched down by the station wall, pressing snowballs in their hands, and they had another pile of snowballs already made, on the ground. In the reflected light of the snow their faces were eager with excitement.

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As she came within range, not seeing them, looking down at her feet, walking as if she did not know where she was going, they pressed the snowballs harder in their hands, laughing now.

‘Get ready,’ they said. ‘Here she comes.’

## THE BLACK BOXER

THE morning sun was beating hot over Peterson's fairground. The big coloured awnings shrouding the shows and roundabouts hung heavy and still, and the rings of little gay triangular flags on the roofs of the roundabouts and on the helter-skelter tower flapped senselessly in the summer air.

Perched on a ladder outside the entrance to Sullivan's boxing show a figure in blue dungarees was polishing the big copper bell hanging before the gold and scarlet curtains. In the intervals between polishing the bell and staring lazily over the fair he sometimes spat and dreamily watched the spittle make its arc in the bright sunlight and settle in the hot dust below. Sometimes he seemed to take languid aim at the specks of confetti scattered in the dusty grass like handfuls of gay coloured seeds.

He was a small, sharp-faced man, like a little terrier. His yellowish face was peppered with pock-marks and he was slightly deformed in his left shoulder so that he looked by turns pathetic and sinister. His name was Waite but Sullivan's boxers called him Dutchy. He helped to clean up the show and he often towelled the sweat off the boxers and rubbed them over with the flesh-gloves after the fights.

He gave the bell a final polish and descended the ladder and lit the fag-end of a cigarette and slouched off across the fairground. Men in dungarees and red check shirts and woollen jerseys were busy polishing the brass spirals of the roundabouts and women were hurrying to and fro with pails of water. The smoke of

cooking-fires was rising in soft bluish-white clouds from behind the caravans. A workman kneeling high up on the roof of the highest roundabout was hammering and screwing behind a figure of Venus, naked and shining gold in the sunlight. At every tap of his hammer the Venus trembled in all her limbs.

Dutchy stopped and looked up at the man and whistled him softly.

'Seen Zeke?' he called.

The man raised his oily face and looked over the fairground and called down.

'Some chaps round the back of Cappel's.'

'See Zeke?'

'Can I see through a bloody shooting-gallery?'

He bent down again and tapped behind the Venus, so that she trembled again. Dutchy threw away his cigarette and flashed out a remark about the Venus and the man.

'Aw, go to bed!' the other bawled. He put his arm about the naked Venus in order to steady the figure. Dutchy flashed another remark and walked away.

He slouched lazily through the fair towards Cappel's shooting-gallery. On reaching the shooting-gallery he slipped through a gangway between the awnings and walked across a space of grass and skirted a group of caravans. Beyond the caravans a line of Peterson's great yellow and scarlet trailing vans was drawn up, making a little secluded space of clean grass out of reach of the black and white ponies grazing in the field beyond them. He saw at once that something was happening: a group of show-hands had formed in a ring and were laughing and clapping their hands and shouting noisily. Dutchy slouched from behind the caravans and leaned against the wheel of a water-cart and looked at them.

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In the middle of the ring a big negro was dancing a curious dance, alone. He was dressed in a pair of old grey flapping trousers and a grey sweater tucked in at the top of his trousers, which he kept up with a big bandanna handkerchief printed with great spots of yellow. He was six feet tall, powerful, with magnificent shoulders; the arch of his massive chest looked formidable and superb. He was dancing with a curious flowing negro rhythm, swaying his big hips with an arrogant invitation, brandishing his long arms above his head and letting them droop and swing senselessly with the rhythm of his body. Sometimes he clapped his black hands above his head and on his thighs and his big haunches, and sometimes he let them rest with light grace on the folds of the bandanna handkerchief. He bent his knees and twisted his feet and slithered backward over the grass and then worked forward again, comically slipping and pitching head-first like a man on a sheet of ice. He arched his whole body backward and began to work his feet furiously, as though the grass were moving from beneath him. The show-hands roared at him. He curled and twisted himself and worked the patter of his feet to a mad crescendo and let them fall as suddenly into a solemn, melancholy step again. As his big arms dropped to his side and the dance died down he suddenly began to fling wild cartwheels, scattering the show-hands in all directions. His wild calls mingled with the shouts and laughter of the show-hands, who all applauded. At the noise a young girl came to the door of a green and gold caravan carrying a copper jug which flashed in the sunshine. She set down the jug on the topmost step of the van and clapped her hands. Dutchy spat in the grass and grinned at her and applauded too.

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When the dance had finished and the applause had died away the show-hands closed in about the negro again and he began explaining the steps of the dance. He danced each step slowly again, talking above the murmurs of the men in a clear bass voice. There was something fine and superior about the quality of his deep voice, his perfect accent and the slow, meditative choice of his words. He had a habit of throwing back his head and smiling richly as he talked. His head was massive, the nose flat and broad and the left ear was wrinkled like a cauliflower. The skin of his face was a deep gleaming black, but it was softened by a strange blush of rose. His thick hair was black and dull as soot, and his eyes were bright and sharp as jet against the whites. He looked invincibly strong and as though he gloried in his strength, and at moments there was something about his face solemnly noble, marvellously dignified and sad.

Someone came up behind Dutchy and tapped him on the shoulder and whispered:

‘Zeke busy?’

Dutchy jerked back his head and discovered O’Brien, a young light-weight of Sullivan’s.

‘See for yourself,’ he said.

‘He’s wanted,’ O’Brien said.

‘Who wants him?’

‘Sullivan. He’s down at the booth with Sandy.’

Dutchy took his hands out of his pockets and spat.

‘I’ll go over and tell him. I want to see him myself,’ he said.

He walked across the grass and broke the ring of showmen and touched the negro on the shoulder and whispered something to him.

‘I’ll come,’ said the negro.



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Dutchy waited aside. The negro slowly put on his jacket. The show-hands were dancing about the grass, practising the steps he had shown them. The negro kept smiling broadly. Finally he walked away with Dutchy past the caravans and by the shooting-gallery and across the fairground.

'You know what Sullivan wants,' said Dutchy, as they walked along.

The negro did not speak. They passed beneath the workman tapping at the gilded Venus.

'It's about this training,' said Dutchy.

'There's nothing wrong with me,' said the negro.

'But you're going to fight this Harrison boy Friday and I ain't seen you doing a skip or a bit of shadow for a hell of a while.'

'When you've done as much shadow-boxing as I have,' said the negro, 'you won't be in a travelling-show.'

He suddenly thrust out his arm as they walked along. 'Feel that,' he said.

Dutchy pinched the flesh of the negro's forearm: it seemed as hard as the foreleg of a horse. He nodded and was silent.

'If I train too much I go stale,' said the negro. 'You know that.'

'Tell that to Sullivan,' said Dutchy.

'I hate Sullivan,' said the negro.

They came within sight of the long scarlet, gold-tasselled tent of Sullivan's boxing-show. The ladder was standing at the head of the entrance-steps where Dutchy had left it, and in the hot sunshine the copper bell flashed brightly against the red-curtains behind. The sun-baked awnings, the painted yellow pay-box and the immense pictures of the world's boxing cham-

pions painted crudely across the whole width of the show all looked cheap and tawdry.

Dutchy and the negro stopped before the steps of the show. The air was hot and breathless and the negro's skin gleamed like rose-black silk in the sunshine.

'Go in and tell him you're doing a bit with the ball this afternoon,' said Dutchy. 'We can play pontoon for a bit when you're done.'

The negro shook his head.

'I'm going to sleep this afternoon.'

He turned abruptly on his heel and walked away behind the long red show-tent. He walked without haste, gracefully and lightly.

Coming to the rear of the tent he turned the corner. Sullivan's vans were drawn up behind the tent and outside Sullivan's own van stood a young red-haired boxer talking to Sullivan himself. Sullivan was resting one foot on the steps of the van. His elbow was crooked on his knee and he was fingering his black chin with his hands. He was a small, thin-faced, unshaven, dirty man with narrow eyes and weedy black hair. His mother had been a Lancer from Belfast and his father, a Pole, had been a conjurer in a travelling-show. Sullivan had inherited his mother's name and her dirty tongue. From his father he had learned inexhaustible trickeries. He had been in the show-business for longer than he could remember and had run the boxing-show for twenty years.

He looked up at the negro quickly and searchingly. There was something mean and shifty and subtle about the continual flickering of his small black eyes.

'Hello, Zeke,' he said.

The negro nodded.

'Been training, I see,' said Sullivan. 'Yes?'

The negro shook his head.

'Ain't it time you trained a bit?' said Sullivan.

The negro showed his white teeth and said, 'I'm all right, I don't want to go stale.'

Sullivan sprang off the steps of the van and in a flash of angry temper thrust his face up towards the negro's. 'Stale? By Christ! You know the rules of this bloody show as well as I do.'

The negro looked down at his quivering face impassively, without a word.

'You know the rules of this show!' shouted Sullivan. 'You train and keep yourself in proper nick. I've run this show for twenty years and if you can tell me anything I don't know about boxing I'd be bloody glad to hear it. Bloody glad. You never fought a round last week — not a damn round! And you talk to me about going stale. While I keep you in this show you keep yourself fit like any other man.'

The red-haired boxer walked quietly away. Sullivan's hands were quivering with temper. The negro held out his right arm and said with perfect calm:

'Feel that. I am as fit as any man you ever had in your show.'

Sullivan knocked the arm aside impatiently.

'You know as well as I do you don't need to worry about your arms!' he half shouted. 'Nor your head. It's here, my old cock' — he pressed his two hands on the negro's stomach and screwed up his eyes ominously and lowered his voice — 'You niggers are all alike. Your guts are like a sponge.'

The negro, impassive and tolerant and composed, did not speak.

'Ain't forgot you're fighting this Harrison boy Friday?' said Sullivan quickly.

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'I know.'

'I want you to beat him. If you beat him he'll want to come back before the show goes and fight you again. See that? That means another house – means money. I'm putting up ten pounds in this bout – seven and three. That's money. Ain't that worth training for? Ain't it? I want to see you win, Zeke, I want to see you win this fight. Christ, I do.' Sullivan spat. 'You ain't been winning so many fights lately,' he added slowly.

'I have won plenty of fights for you,' said the negro.

'Not lately – you're getting soft – I don't like it!' Sullivan paused and scratched his unshaven chin and squinted up into the negro's face. His eyes were narrow and inquisitive.

'How old are you, Zeke?' he said.

For the first time uneasiness came into the negro's face. He hesitated.

'I am thirty-four,' he said.

Sullivan whistled very softly.

'Good age for a boxer,' he said.

'For a white man.'

'It's a good age for any boxer – I don't care who he is,' said Sullivan. 'If a boxer ain't careful that's when he begins to lay the fat on. And that's what you'll do – that's what I don't like. Look at your guts. You better do a bit with the ball before the sun gets too hot.'

'I will train this afternoon,' said the negro.

'You'll train now! Christ! Do I run this show or do you?'

'I don't feel the heat so much.'

'You'll do it now!' shouted Sullivan. 'You'll do it now or get out of this show!'

They stood looking at each other for one moment antagonistically, in perfect silence. Sullivan's little

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eyes, bloodshot in the whites, were dilating with anger and his hands were unsteady with temper. The negro gave one long look at him and then without a word or a change of expression he turned and strode away, imperturbable, solemn and dignified, and vanished into the boxing caravan, a long red vehicle painted with Sullivan's name in big yellow letters across the sides, before Sullivan himself could move or speak again.

### II

On Friday evening Sullivan and his four boxers were displaying themselves in the blazing light of the big electric lamps hanging over the platform outside the show. The fair was flashing and whirling and quivering with light. Between the shows moved a dark flock of people. There was an air of gaiety and great excitement in the shrieking and laughing and shouting of voices, the brassy music of the big roundabout, the crack of rifle shots and the thunder of switchback cars, which never seemed to rest. The night was sultry, without wind, and above the electric lights the summer darkness, freckled with tiny stars, was coming down a soft dark blue.

The four boxers, in dressing-gowns, stood in an imposing line, their arms folded, facing the crowd. Sullivan stood before them in his shirt-sleeves, shouting and gesticulating with a megaphone. His voice was thin and hoarse and he kept striking his fist with the palm of his hand, like an orator.

'The greatest array of real fighters any generation ever saw in any one show at any time! I'm telling you. I ain't asking you if these men look like fighters. Look at 'em! You know what a boxer looks like. You don't

want me to tell you that these men ain't milk-sops! You're sportsmen! You come here because you're sportsmen. Now take a look at that young feller in the blue dressing-gown. Take a look at him! Dan O'Brien – nine stone ten – nineteen years old – and he'll fight a six-round exhibition bout with any jack-man in this crowd, any jack-man two stone above his own weight. Any jack-man you like to name!

Sullivan seized a pair of boxing gloves and flourished them before the crowd and searched it fiercely. A hand went up among the white faces and Sullivan tossed the gloves among the crowd.

'There's a sportsman!' he yelled. 'Now another? Where's another? Any man like a six-round exhibition bout with Sandy Hack, from Dunkirk, twenty-three years old, eleven stone six? Hack will fight any man in the fourteen stone class! Thank you!'

Sullivan leapt nimbly across the platform and stood before a huge, sardonic-faced heavy-weight, dark and glowering as a Russian, and yelled:

'Dado Flowers! Twelve stone ten! Flowers has fought in America, and it would be an honour for any boy to beat him in a six-round bout! An honour! What will he give away? He'll fight an elephant!'

Someone at the back of the crowd threw up his hand and Sullivan tossed the gloves away and clapped his hands. 'And now gentlemen.' He leaned forward confidentially and spread out his hands in caricature of a Jew, and spoke in a harsh deliberate whisper:

'Half a crown. See!'

There was a flash of silver in his dirty fingers, he smiled, and the coin vanished. He stepped across the platform and twisted the ear of the huge sardonic heavy-weight and the coin dropped neatly into his

hands from the boxer's nose. He tossed the coin in the air and caught it again and washed his hands of it. It reappeared in Hack's red hair. Sullivan made a joke about the Scottish people. It was an old joke. The spectators laughed, and then Sullivan pointed his fingers at them and whispered dramatically: 'Wait!' The crowd, fascinated, watched him without a murmur as he crossed the platform and stood by the huge, impassive figure of the negro.

There was a moment's pause. Suddenly the negro opened his mouth and the coin flashed bright against his black skin and seemed to disappear between his red lips. When his mouth closed again he stood immobile again, staring over the crowd without a change in his expression of superb dignity, as though nothing had happened.

Dramatically Sullivan waved his arms and sent his fingers rippling through the negro's thick black hair and disentangled the coin. He grinned cleverly at the crowd and shouted hoarsely:

'Zeke Pinto! The coloured man! The American coloured boxer! Pinto will fight a special ten-round bout for a purse of ten pound with Dan Harrison, your own man!'

The faded red curtains behind the boxers parted and Harrison himself, not yet stripped for boxing, slouched forward on the platform for the crowd to applaud him. His thick, loose body, his half-crouching walk and the heavy-browed, glowering expression of his blond, small-eyed face contrasted strangely with the perfect repose, the superb pride and the blackness of the negro. While Sullivan continued to shout hoarsely the details of the contest between them, they stood side by side without moving or looking at each other, incongruous

and indifferent to one another to the point of contempt.

The crowd were beginning to throng towards the pay-boxes and vanish through the openings in the red curtains on either side of the booth. Sullivan seized the megaphone and began to yell a frenzy of speech over the crowd, cajoling and demanding vociferously like some desperate orator. Between his more impassioned speeches O'Brien clanged arresting notes on the copper bell. The big Russian-looking heavy-weight began working on the punch-ball hanging up outside the curtains, fisting it grimly with light fascinating punches and watching it perpetually with a sardonic, half-smiling grin. Harrison slouched through the curtains and disappeared.

The negro did not change his expression of impassive dignity, and suddenly, as though incensed by it, Sullivan took the megaphone from his lips and whispered to him in a voice of sneering impatience:

'For Christ's sake wake up. Do something. Get round to the van and get Dutchy to give you a rub-down. You look as if you're having a bad dream.'

The negro turned and vanished through the curtains without a word. He elbowed his way through the waiting crowd inside the booth and walked out of the booth across the grass between the show-vans towards the boxers' dressing-van. He hated Sullivan. He had hated him bitterly since morning for his meanness, his bad temper, his sneers, the insult of the word nigger. He had ached to knock Sullivan senseless. He had hated so much the craftiness in his sudden question 'How old are you, Zeke?' that it had given him a curious sense of pleasure to tell him that he was only thirty-four. But the pleasure had quickly vanished again. During the hot afternoon, sitting gambling



with Dutchy in the shade of one of Peterson's vans, he had often reminded himself that he was older than Sullivan dreamed. He was past forty. At forty a boxer was an old man. Until lately it had been easy to deceive Sullivan; but lately he had begun to feel slower in the ring and had lost fights which he ought to have won. When he lost the money went out of the show, so that Sullivan also lost. That was bad business. He saw the significance of Sullivan's question: he was growing old and he was bad business. There were younger boxers. He knew already what to expect if he lost the fight with Harrison.

He walked across the dark grass and up the steps of the dressing-van slowly, realizing for one moment what it all meant to him. He opened the door of the van. A paraffin-lamp was burning, there was a powerful smell of liniment, and he saw Dutchy sitting on a box, smoking a cigarette and reading a pink comic-newspaper. He stepped into the van and shut the door with his back. It seemed every moment more than ever imperative that he should win the fight with Harrison.

At the sound of the door Dutchy dropped the pink newspaper as though startled and jumped to his feet.

'All right?' he said quickly.

'Sullivan sent me to you for a rub-down.'

'You don't want a rub-down before you fight do you?'

The negro sat down on the box.

'In this show you do what Sullivan tells you.'

Dutchy spat a shred of tobacco from his mouth with a sound of disgust and took a penny from his pocket and spun it in the air. He caught it deftly on the back of his left hand and covered it with his right. He had

a passion for gambling. The smoke of his cigarette burned straight upward into his eyes, so that his face was wrinkled and squinting as he turned it to the negro.

'Heads,' said Pinto.

Dutchy looked at the coin and put it back into his pocket.

'Again,' said the negro. 'What I lose I'll square up later.'

Dutchy tossed the coin and the negro called 'Heads' again, wrongly. Too lazy to take the cigarette from his mouth Dutchy blew away the ash with a snort of his nose. The negro, dreamily watching the grey ash float in the air and settle again, seemed oblivious for a moment of Dutchy and the toss of the coin. He murmured 'Heads' again.

'Your luck's out,' said Dutchy.

They went on alternately tossing and calling the coin for what seemed to the negro a long time. The repeated spin of the coin became like the everlasting revolution of the thought that he must win the fight with Harrison. He felt himself filled by an oppressive gloomy determination to win.

Dutchy was in the act of tossing the coin when footsteps ran up the ladder of the van and Sullivan burst in. He immediately began to speak to the negro.

'I want you to win this fight, Zeke,' he said. 'And I want you to win it fair - straight - no monkey business. See that?'

'What sort of a house?' drawled Dutchy.

'Packed. D'ye hear me, Zeke?'

The negro was staring at the photographs of boxers pinned everywhere on the walls of the van.

'D'ye hear me, Zeke? I want you to win this fight -

and clean. This boy can box. But you beat him clean and it'll be a credit to you. Box him and beat him clean. You hear me?"

"Don't I always fight clean?" said the negro.

"I know, I know you do. Don't get your rag out. I want you to win, that's all. I'll treat you square. Trust me. I'll get back now and watch Dado finishing, and you can come over and show yourself in a minute or two. I'll treat you square."

He left the van quickly, but before Dutchy or the negro could move the door opened again and Sullivan thrust in his head. He delivered an urgent last whisper:

"Box him and beat him clean, that's all. That's all. I'll treat you square. Trust me."

He vanished.

There was a moment of silence. The negro slowly unloosened his dressing-gown and stood on the box on which he had been sitting. Dutchy spat out his cigarette in disgust. "Trust me," he sneered softly. "Trust a bloody snake."

With quick light fingers he began loosening the negro's muscles, first on the calves, then the thighs, and finally on the body. The black skin was supple and fine as satin in his fingers. The air was sultry and little yellow balls of sweat stood on his face before he had finished.

"You'll win," he kept saying to the negro between little panting noises. "Any money. Easy."

The negro stood utterly immobile, not speaking, staring at the rows of boxing photographs with something sceptical and philosophical in his eyes. Dutchy worked over the muscles just above the belt-line, kneading them gently. The muscles yielded, flabbier than the rest of his body.

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'You'll win,' said Dutchy. 'Keep him off your guts, that's all.'

The negro nodded. Presently he knotted up his dressing-gown and they walked together out of the van and across the grass among the show-vans and entered the boxing-booth. The tent, brilliantly lighted, was thronged with spectators surging backwards and forwards about the ropes of the ring like a flock of sheep penned between the ropes and the red canvas. There was a low, continuous murmur of voices. The white light of electric lamps poured down on Flowers and a bony young boxer in red drawers, sparring out their last round. Flowers was ambling carelessly about the ring, flickering and tapping his man with sardonic friendliness. Sometimes the young boxer would aim fierce unhappy blows at Flowers, making the loose boards creak under his clumsy feet, and the crowd would break into laughter. Flowers was smiling and there was a smear of blood across the young boxer's mouth as the round ended and the crowd applauded the men.

The negro elbowed his way through the crowd and the ring had been empty a second or two when he climbed over the ropes and sat down in the corner. Almost at the same moment Harrison climbed into the ring too, and sat in the corner opposite him. The crowd cat-called and applauded, and broke into a hum of conversation at the sight of Harrison, who sat staring across the ring from under his blond surly brows. The negro looked at the crowd calmly. It was a big house. Two of Sullivan's men climbed a ladder and rolled back a sheet of canvas roof and let in a current of fresh air. Dutchy climbed into the ring and began to put on the negro's gloves.

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'Keep him off your guts,' he whispered. 'Let him wear hisself out. He's a madhead. Let him gallop for three rounds and you'll have him taped.'

Without speaking or even nodding in answer the negro leaned back his head and let it rest against the ropes. Staring upward he could see through the gap in the roof a sprinkle of stars shining against the darkness of the summer sky.

Dutchy was putting on his second glove when Sullivan crawled into the ring under the bottom rope. Standing in the centre of the ring he held up his hand and called for order. The negro did not look at him and he heard only vaguely the speech he began to bawl at the crowd. He felt tired and he did not want to fight.

Sullivan was repeating the old formula. 'You come to this show to see a fight! You come to see fair play! And you shall have 'em! If you have any remarks to pass I ask you to pass them afterwards – not while the rounds are in progress. Be fair to these boys and they will give you a good fight. A good, honest fight! That's straight, ain't it? No love-tapping! You know what I mean by no love-tapping! The boys are out to win. I tell you on my oath, my solid oath, and God strike me dead if I tell a lie – there never has been a squared fight in this show – and never will be!'

His voice rose to a shout and the crowd applauded vigorously.

'Now I shall present a ten-round contest between Dan Harrison –'

Harrison stood up and the crowd began to cheer for him.

'Dan Harrison, of your own town, and Zeke Pinto, the American coloured boxer. A ten-round fight for a

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purse of ten pounds!' The negro stood up and nodded his head and Sullivan appealed to the spectators.

'Give the coloured man a clap. A man's a man and a boxer's a boxer, whether he's coloured or not. Pinto will fight fair and clean, and if he wins I hope you will acknowledge him like the sportsmen I know you are. Give the coloured man a clap, gentlemen, give the coloured man a clap.'

The negro half rose to his feet again, making a slight bow. He was conscious vaguely of the noise of applause, the quivering of many white pairs of hands under the bright lights, and of Harrison arching back his thick neck, drinking something from a dark wine bottle and spitting it over the side of the ring again.

A moment later Sullivan, who was to referee the fight himself, took off his jacket and called the two boxers to the centre of the ring and spoke with them. Conscious merely of the harsh voice repeating the old formula again, the negro did not listen. By turns there would come over him the strange feeling that he did not want to fight, and the gloomy oppressive thought that he must fight and win. 'And keep your tempers,' said Sullivan. 'Like good boys. That's all.'

The negro returned to his corner. He took off his dressing-gown and putting his hands on the ropes, worked his body to and fro, loosening his muscles. Against his bright yellow drawers his naked skin gleamed very black, the fine lights suffused with rose, as though the blackness had been smeared with a soft pink oil. He took one long deep breath; Dutchy whispered something to him; and he heard the stroke of the gong.

He stood upright, turned about, walked towards the centre of the ring and touched gloves with Harrison.

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His pose was quiet, unstooping and unexaggerated. His huge black form was splendid and intimidating in its dignity. His face was marvellously calm. Harrison came forward with a low crouch of his shoulders, his surly blond head thrust forward aggressively, his guard very close. They worked away and round each other for a second or two, watchfully. The crowd was silent.

Suddenly Harrison made a lead with his left to the negro's face and followed up swiftly. The negro took the punches on his gloves. Harrison led again and the negro fought back, grazing Harrison's face. They closed with each other, and Harrison began peppering the negro's body with short jabs which fell on his ribs and the soft flesh just above the belt. The negro tried to cover himself and step away but the blows were unexpected and quick and he took the punishment of them unguarded. When he finally broke away he was panting and there was a dull throbbing in his body where the punches had fallen. As he stepped away Harrison forced him to the ropes and attacked him viciously, hooking his right. The negro saw the blow coming and waited for what seemed a complete second, and then side-stepped swiftly. It was a beautiful movement. He heard the crowd murmur in admiration. Experiencing a moment of satisfaction and feeling fresh and cool again he worked away from the corner before Harrison could recover. Harrison followed and they began fighting close in again, and again a shower of quick jabbing blows fell on the negro's body. The punches were short, stinging and powerful. The negro felt shaken and winded. He covered his body with his arms and ducked his head, taking the blows on his arms and shoulders until he had recovered his breath. Harrison came to a clinch at

last and Sullivan broke them away. A little excited, Harrison left his hands loose after the clinch had been broken and the negro stepped across and found his jaw with a quick hook of his right. Harrison went down, panting and resting on his elbow while Sullivan counted to nine, bawling the counts in order to make himself heard above the babble of the crowd. At nine Harrison was on his feet again. He rushed straight for the negro, his head low and aggressive. They closed, and they were chest to chest, struggling for an opening, as the gong rang.

In the interval the negro sat with his arms limp on the ropes, his head back and his eyes closed. The fanning of the towel sent waves of cooler air on his face. He nodded when Dutchy gave him the old advice: 'Keep him off your guts,' and sometimes he felt the muscles of his body flutter just above the belt, where Harrison had jabbed him. He knew that Harrison had found his weakness.

The second round began as though Harrison had conceived a violent hatred for the negro. He was younger than the negro by twenty years. He had a fast, powerful fearless style, and he was warm with resentment at having taken a count of nine. He led quickly for the negro's face but Pinto stepped aside and struck his left ear with the heel of the glove. It was as though the punch had released a whirlwind: the short jabbing blows began to rain on the negro's body before he could cover up again. Crooking his arms and lowering his head, he staggered against Harrison and tried to fend him off, but the punches had sickened him. He had backed away to the ropes, and this time when Harrison attacked again he was too slow to duck away. He took a fresh onslaught of body blows that



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sickened him from his knees upward. He felt strange and stunned and the shouts of the crowd were like a great drumming in his head. The crowd was shouting for Harrison. He staggered drunkenly and recovered and then crouched and staggered against Harrison, keeping his head low. For the rest of the round he did nothing but try desperately to keep out of Harrison's reach and he was lying on the boards when the gong rang.

During the interval Dutchy worked on his stomach and freshened him with the towel and urged the old advice upon him. He nodded vaguely. The whole pandemonium of the fair seemed to clamour in his head, the shouting of the crowd, the tunes of the hurdy-gurdy, the snap of rifle-shots, the thunder of switchbacks and the silly shrieking of young girls. He could not gather his thoughts.

During the third round and again in the fourth Harrison knocked him down. Each time he took a count of nine, resting on his elbow. At every count the crowd shouted wildly. He knew that he was losing, and he knew that no one wanted him to win. After every punch he felt slower, and behind Harrison's big menacing face the white faces of the crowd seemed to surge up to him and ebb away in a babbling tide.

In the intervals his arms felt leaden, his legs fluttered with sickness, and his body felt old and sore. He knew that he was looked upon as beaten already. He could see the unpleasantness in Sullivan's face as he leaned in the corner and noted the points on a scrap of paper.

When the gong rang for the fifth round Harrison rushed across the ring and met him with a wild attack on his body. He was flushed and sweating, and his eyes were glowing with an eagerness to finish off the negro.

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He hooked wildly but the blow missed and the negro, full of a sudden despairing calmness, gathered himself and swung heavily at Harrison's jaw. The punch connected, Harrison went down, and then leapt to his feet again before Sullivan had time to count. The crowd cheered him. He rushed at the negro madly again, without success. The negro felt strangely calm, his fears lessened. Harrison seemed suddenly baffled and angry. He repeated his attack and the crowd clamoured madly for the knock-out. He came and attacked again, angry and distressed by his failure to hit the negro. The negro, for the first time impassive and unharassed, struck Harrison's jaw with a short, straight punch. Harrison tottered and fell on one knee, hanging to the rope with his left hand. The booth was like a madhouse, the crowd yelling for Harrison to stand up. He rose slowly, holding to the ropes, panting heavily. The ropes were very loose and as he trusted his weight to them they sagged and he pitched forward drunkenly. The negro followed up with his right. Harrison gloved off the blow but staggered and pitched forward again, like a boomerang. Something like a primitive frenzy came over the negro. He leapt forward and hit Harrison madly as he was falling. The blow struck hard below the belt and Harrison quivered and pitched upward through the ropes and dropped heavily into the crowd.

The negro stood utterly still in the ring. It was all over. He was conscious vaguely of Harrison being counted out and of the crowd yelling angrily for a foul. He knew that he had fouled Harrison, and he knew that the crowd hated him.

Sullivan finished the count and seizing the negro's arm held it above his head and shouted:

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‘Pinto!’

The crowd hooted the negro, who stood statuesque and bewildered, as though not understanding what had happened. His arm dropped listlessly. Dutchy came into the ring and flung the dressing-gown over his shoulders. Sullivan walked round the ring holding up his hands and trying to quieten the pandemonium, but the crowd called derisively, ‘Go to Hell! Shut your bloody mouth!’ Harrison crawled back through the ropes, holding his stomach, dazed and reeling. The crowd cheered and clamoured for him. His seconds began a furious altercation with Sullivan, thrusting their faces close up to him, livid with temper. Flowers and Hack leapt into the ring and pushed away the seconds, elbowing them away like policemen. The booth was full of a shouting, quarrelling pandemonium.

Dutchy kept close to the negro. ‘All right,’ he kept repeating. ‘All right. Didn’t I tell you you’d win?’

The negro, dazed and despondent, never moved. He looked like a solemn black statue. He stared apathetically from the crowd to Harrison and from Harrison to Sullivan. He saw Sullivan waving some paper money in his hand and he saw Harrison take the money and count it. There were three pounds. After that he vaguely understood that Sullivan was appealing to the crowd, who were beginning to listen to his hoarse insinuating voice.

‘You know that in this show or any other show the referee’s word must stand. Ain’t that so? If the referee gives way to the crowd what happens? You know what happens! He’s no more good! He’s finished. He’s done. Napoo! I’ve refereed more fights than any man in this show has ever seen. And if any other man will come

up here in my place I shall welcome him gladly! Gladly! Harrison's a good fighter – a game feller – and when he was knocked out he was leading on points, let me tell you that. He's a game feller.'

The crowd began to cheer again.

'But he was knocked out! Knocked out! And fair. And no man in this crowd will make me change my opinion that he was knocked out! But to show that I think he's a game feller and a good fighter –'

The negro saw Sullivan flourish another pound note in the air. He saw Harrison come forward and accept the money while Sullivan patted his back. The crowd cheered and clapped and stamped its feet for Harrison.

Sullivan held up his hands and quietened the crowd.

'And now give the coloured man a clap,' he shouted; 'and now give the coloured man a clap!'

The crowd gave the negro a round of applause.

The negro knotted the cord of his dressing-gown. He saw Sullivan looking at him closely, his shifty eyes filled with impatience and contempt. He felt humiliated and dazed, and he hated Sullivan bitterly for awarding him the fight. He climbed under the ropes and leapt softly down on the grass and began to elbow his way through the crowd, back to the dressing-room. Dutchy, following him, threw a towel about his neck. The crowd murmured a little as it parted to let him through.

He went in the dressing-van and sat down on a box. There was an odour of sweat and liniment and the oil from the lamp burning on the table. He stared vaguely at the flame burning steady and yellow behind the smoky lamp-glass, and then at the rows of boxing photographs lit up by the orange light of the lamp. His legs were unsteady and fluttering, as though he

had been running very hard and for a long time. His stomach and his ribs were bruised and sore. His arms seemed heavy and wooden and his whole body felt old and feeble and empty, like the husk of something.

'Christ! You won,' said Dutchy. 'Didn't I tell you you'd win?'

The negro lifted his hands listlessly for Dutchy to take off the gloves. He was thinking of Sullivan, the foul, and the way the crowd had hooted him. The mad frenzy in which he had fouled Harrison had left him tired and stupefied and ashamed.

Dutchy slipped off first one glove and then the other. The negro opened his hot damp hands and was too listless to shut them again.

Dutchy unknotted the cord of his dressing-gown and threw the gown back over the black shoulders, warm and shining dark with sweat, and began to rub the shoulders gently. The negro slowly stood up. His dressing-gown slipped to the floor and he stood motionless, solemn and mute, staring straight at the boxing pictures pinned on the wall before him.

'Feeling all right?' Dutchy asked. 'Didn't I tell you you'd win? You'll be all right. Didn't I tell you? Easy! You'll be all right.'

He threw the towel aside and drew the flesh-gloves on his hands. The negro slowly bent his back. There was a strange expression of sadness on his face and an air of weariness about his whole body, and he was not listening to Dutchy's words.

'Easy,' said Dutchy. 'You'll be all right. Didn't I tell you?'



## ON THE ROAD

THE wood was flooded with April sunlight, but shallow pools of rain lay wherever there were hollows in the black earth under the oak trees. Black rings of ashes were dotted about the ground where tramps had made their fires and rested, and primroses were blooming everywhere at the feet of young hazel trees. The wind that blew the hazels with a soft sound one against another was sweet and warm and laden with the scent of the primroses. It was like the breath of a new life.

A man came into the wood from the road and strode a hundred paces into it at random among the hazel trees. He was tall and black-haired and powerfully broad at the shoulders; except when he stooped beneath the undergrowth. He carried himself superbly, with a slight swagger of his hips, holding his head high up, and sometimes throwing it slightly backward, with unconscious motions of arrogance and pride. He looked less like a tramp than a fighter but less like a fighter than some proud sardonic Indian. His face was muscular and powerful; the skin was burnt tough and dry by the sun, and there was a glimpse of a tattoo mark of a purple and crimson flower on his naked chest. He was dressed in light brown trousers, a black jacket slung over his shoulder, a soft grey hat, and a blue shirt faded and washed to the colour of the sky. He stooped and nicked off a primrose with a finger-nail and put the flower in his mouth. He was looking for a place to rest.

He took another twenty paces into the wood and saw

the white smoke of a fire among the trees. He stopped and gazed at the smoke for one moment and then walked on. In another moment he came upon a woman and man sitting by the fire on a space of earth between a sallow bush and an oak tree.\* The man was asleep with his head against the oak tree and the woman was boiling a can of water on a heap of smoking wood. He saw a black bundle on the earth and an old perambulator pushed back against the sallow.

He stood perfectly still and gazed at the woman without a flicker of his dark eyes. She was dressed in a short black skirt and an old stained orange-coloured jersey stretched as tight as skin over her big breasts and shoulders. Her hair was very thick and blonde and there was something about her that recalled a lioness: the tawny eyes sleepy and rich with changing lights, the lips ripe and heavy, the large, strong face superb with its passionate languor. She had a newspaper open on her knees but she put it down on the earth as he looked at her. Her hands were strong and handsome, and the skin was a beautiful golden colour, smooth and with tiny blonde hairs that gleamed in the sunshine."

'Sit down,' she said. She waved her hand. There were no rings on her fingers. Her voice was low, careless and husky.

He looked at the man lying with his head against the oak tree. She half smiled.

'He's asleep,' she said. 'He's all right. You won't wake him.'

He sat down on the black earth. He sat so that he could see both the man and the woman at one glance. In an instant he saw astounding differences between them. The man was haggard and white, and the bones



of his cheeks stood out clear and sharp as knuckles under his dark eyes. His face was dirty and dissolute and strengthless, and he lay like a man who had received a stunning blow, his closed eyes dark as two deep bruises under his narrow brows. He looked as if he would never wake again, and the woman looked at him with one hasty glance of indifference, as if not caring whether he woke or not.

The water in the can began to bubble, and the woman slipped a stick under the handle and took the can from the fire. The man leaned across without hesitation and quickly shook something brown from a packet into the water.

'You're very smart,' she flashed, looking up. 'What was that?'

He leaned over and stirred the water with the stick, which he took from her own hands. 'Coffee.'

He had spoken all the time with the primrose in his mouth, and now he leaned back and took the flower from his mouth and spat away an inch of bitten stalk and put it back again. There was something about the paleness of the primrose against his dark face that made him doubly arresting.

They stared at each other in silence, their eyes languid and bold and unflickering.

'Where are you making for?' he asked suddenly.

'Liverpool,' she said.

He looked at the perambulator. Then he glanced at her shoes. He noticed for the first time her blistered feet through the soles. He looked at her sharply.

'You're a hell of a way from Liverpool,' he said. 'A hell of a way.'

She did not answer. The smell of the coffee was strong in the wood, and there was no sound except the

whistling of a blackbird and of bees booming softly in the yellow-dusty sallow blooms. She reached over to the bundle and brought out two blue enamel cups and poured out the coffee and handed a cup to him.

'No sugar,' she said in a languid voice.

He fumbled at his pocket and brought out a packet of yellow sugar and set it on the earth between them and nodded towards the sleeping man.

'Going to wake him?' he said.

She shrugged her shoulders and tasted the coffee.

'What's wrong with him?' he said.

She crooked her elbow and smiled ironically and took a deep drink of her coffee.

'Like a fish,' she said.

He nodded and looked at the thin white face more closely. It seemed very young.

'Twenty-five,' she said. 'And he was a fine kid. But now -' she laid her two hands just above her breasts and shook her head.

The man took the primrose from his mouth and threw it on the earth and ~~began to drink his coffee.~~ The sunshine came warmly down on his face, and as he tilted back his head he felt the intent and sleepy gaze of the woman on his face too.

'Where are you going yourself?' she said.

He finished drinking and wiped his lips and stared at her body, admiring her.

'I want to get to Bristol and find a ship and get to Valparaiso,' he said. 'I'm sick of this country. I used to know a man in Valparaiso. I made some money there at one time.'

She nodded her head and took another drink of her coffee and repeated thoughtfully:

'Valparaiso.'

He drained his coffee and spat the grounds from his mouth and leaned back on one elbow. The place where they were sitting was for a space of a foot or two without shadow, and the spring sunshine poured full on the woman's head, so that her hair seemed more than ever golden and the strength and passion in her face finer in the yellow light. The old orange jersey had a row of buttons at her breast, but the first was missing and the second had slipped from its buttonhole. Her breast gleamed soft and fair against the dirty orange stuff, and half-unconsciously her hand moved and she did up the button afresh. But when her hand dropped back to her knees the swelling of her breast burst it apart again.

'What's it like in a place like Valparaiso?' she said suddenly.

'You know as well as I do.'

She nodded.

'If the good God just thinks fit it can be wonderful,' he went on. 'In one month in Valparaiso, I made five hundred pounds. And easy too. I made it too easy. I wasn't satisfied. I thought I could go down to Buenos Aires and make a lot more. I lost every penny in a fortnight. Then I went up to Panama and on to Cuba and over to San Francisco. I made a bit of money sometimes but I could never keep it long. Now I want to get back to Valparaiso. But if things go wrong I dare say I shall want to get back here again.'

His voice was deep and easy and there was something nonchalant and ironical and dreamy about his words. The woman sat watching him with an expression of undisguised intensity, contemplating his dark face with a marvellous steadiness of her sleepy eyes, lost in thought. She seemed in that moment extraordinarily

young, her face transformed by a moment of the strangest rapture. She looked at him candidly and enviously, and then suddenly with a glance of full-blooded passion too, her eyes wide and perfectly child-like, her bosom falling and heaving rapidly.

They sat for a moment and watched each other again like two animals. His lips gradually assumed a little sardonic smile but she never changed her expression of marvellous intensity. The sun was warming the primroses and the sallow bloom, and the air was filled with the soft scents of them, the smell of wood smoke and the strong odour of earth.

The man beneath the tree stirred suddenly in his sleep and began to breathe heavily, like someone drunk, without waking.

The sound upset the woman. In a moment the fine expression on her face was lost. The sardonic, dreamy smile vanished from the lips of the man too. He stood up.

'I'll push on,' he said.

The woman rose to her feet also and stretched her arms over her head with a motion of weariness. In the moment that the orange jersey and the black skirt were pulled skin-tight over her rigid body he saw that she was pregnant.

She lowered her arms with a sigh, her magnificent body all languorous and heavy with its burden of strength and life. She yawned, and then smiled at him when she had finished the yawn.

'You're not so very old?' he said.

'Twenty-nine.'

'And some,' he guessed ironically.

'No.' She shook her head. 'Twenty-nine.'

'I believe you,' he said.

## ON THE ROAD

He looked straight into her eyes and nodded, thinking for one moment of the sleepy man, the perambulator, her shoes, her lacerated feet and her pregnancy. She returned his look with some of the old intensity, but now as though she were thinking of something else, very far away.

'Well, I'll get,' he said. 'What'll you do if you get to Liverpool?'

She lifted her face a fraction towards the sun and shook her head. Instantly he turned away his head, as if he regretted bitterly having spoken.

'So long. Good luck for Valparaiso,' she said.

'So long,' he said. 'Good luck for Liverpool.'

They looked at each other for a single instant, and something warm and tender flashed between them before he turned away and began to stride through the wood towards the road.

The wands of the hazel trees kept whipping back as he passed and the pollen was shaken from the thick catkins, and a golden dust came falling through the beams of sunlight slanting between the trees. The sound of the swaying branches and cracking whips grew rapidly farther and farther away and the hazel trees trembled less and less and finally became still again. The woman sat down, rested her face in her hands and stared in thought at the primroses and the sleeping man. The last of the branches swayed to rest in its place again and the wood was silent.



## A LOVE STORY

CHRISTINA VERNEY was seventeen when I fell in love with her. She used to live in those days with her parents at a small white dairy shaded by a tall green sycamore that grew in the churchyard, and we used to go on long walks together to take butter to outlying cottages. She was a small, demure, delicate creature. She reminded one of a primrose, and she was so shy that for a long time I hesitated to tell her what I felt for her.

One warm, blue afternoon in July we took two baskets and walked over a stretch of meadowland and through a wood to a solitary house beyond, where we were to buy cherries for her mother. It was not until we emerged from the wood into the sunshine that we saw the house we had gone to visit, resting among its bright-coloured flowers and beehives like an aged woman on a stick, sleepy and bowed, with the shadows of a grove of cherry trees falling over its yellow walls and its dark red threshold.

The whole world was hot and still. A few frightened blackbirds rose screeching from the cherry trees, red with fruit but unnetted, as Christina ran into the garden, I following slowly with the white baskets, hanging backward a little, wondering who we were going to see.

Christina stood for one moment at the doorway. She was dressed all in pale, shining green, and there was something so fresh and delicate about her that I could not take my eyes away from her. I saw her lean forward and watched with envy a little white kitten come and caress her feet with its nose.

## A LOVE STORY

She spoke to someone, and then disappeared, while I waited in the drowsy garden, thinking of her.

Presently she reappeared and called to me:

'Come in! Don't be shy!'

And simultaneously an unknown masculine voice, old and croaking, repeated:

'Yes, come in, young man, come in!'

I entered the house through the low doorway and passed into a tiny room beyond.

There, in one corner, his head resting on a window-ledge set out prettily with pink and white geraniums and a solitary rich blue gloxinia, an old man was sitting. He was dressed simply in brown corduroy trousers and a faded blue shirt, without a jacket. Round his neck was tied a crimson neckerchief. He seemed disabled and did not get up, but contemplated me dreamily for some moments, never moving his massive, simple features. At last he nodded, smiled, held out his hand, and as I shook it, called out in a heavy, guttural voice:

'Mary Ann! Mary Ann! Fanny's girl come for her cherries!'

There was a brief silence, during which I gazed at Christina again.

But suddenly through a door behind her, I saw a woman appear. She came noiselessly, thin, frail, yellow-skinned, dressed all in black except for a silver brooch at her throat. Her pale melancholy eyes could hardly raise themselves to look at me, and they fell almost instantaneously again to the little lace-bobbin, on which she seemed to be threading beads of turquoise and amber with a silver wire quivering in her long pale fingers.

After a moment she saw Christina.



## A LOVE STORY

'Cherries!' she broke out, a little fearfully. 'You've come for the cherries? But not this afternoon? You don't mean to take them away?'

Our coming had excited her and her voice began to waver:

'We've none gathered. Won't you leave your basket and come again?' she said.

'Tomorrow?' we suggested.

'Tomorrow's Sunday? Yes, tomorrow.' Sitting down, she gave me a look of relief and tried to go on threading the blue and amber beads again.

As if something were on her mind, however, her fingers grew idle and she kept looking at each of us in turn, and I knew she was aching to speak. At last she managed to whisper:

'It would have been different if Elijah had been here. You see, you should have had them then. You see, Saturday afternoon he'd have been free, and up the trees before you could speak.'

I nodded. Immediately, as if in response to this gesture, she ran into the other room. Before she returned the other figure among the geraniums strained forward and pulled at my sleeve. There was suddenly an air of excitement. In the succeeding moments the old man began relating, rapidly and fitfully, some story which the woman came and interrupted with her small, quavering voice and rendered incoherent. I could only gather that they were talking about their son.

At last the woman brought out a photograph, dusting it zealously with her long sleeve. He had been a shoe-smith, and the portrait depicted him standing by the side of a beautiful black mare. Both man and horse were enormous, handsome creatures. The

## A LOVE STORY

woman dropped her bobbin in the excitement of pointing out that the strong white arms of the man were as thick as the forelegs of the beast. She began to heap on me documents, certificates, yellow cuttings from newspapers, red and crimson ribbons, medals, and a silver cup, all relating to him.

'They couldn't touch him. He was a masterpiece. But you see that, don't you? They used to carry him home after the championship was over. He always won. No one couldn't touch him.'

The old man, half laughing, half crying, put into my hands another photograph in a heavy gilded frame.

'There he is again. See him? That's him. Cocking there in the front row with all the Cavalry officers. He used to shoe all their horses. They liked him that much they treated him just like one of themselves.'

And they continued. After a little time, however, I felt their tone change, and presently they spoke of his death. They spoke heavily, with regret, but also as if challenging me to deny that for him death had been something noble and glorious.

He had been kicked one night by a ferocious horse at the camp, and had died without seeing them again.

As they were talking, I became conscious, suddenly, of a shadow over the doorway, and looking up, noticed a figure there. With her face half turned to us, her sturdy arms holding before her a basket of mellow gooseberries, stood a dark-haired girl of twenty-five or six, watching and listening. The grave dreaminess of her face, her unbroken silence, her apathetic pose, arrested me by their air of mystery. The resignation of her small white face, never stirring, never changing its expression of dumb meekness, troubled me. So she stood, for a long time a mere object, like the shadow

## A LOVE STORY

she cast in the doorway, until she silently vanished without having uttered a word.

Soon after she had disappeared, we rose and departed too. Their last earnest, apologetic words were called after us as we crossed the garden:

'If he'd been here you could have had them, like a shot, you see, while you waited. But you come tomorrow. They'll be ready then!'

We entered the wood, traversing the green, half-sunlit riding in silence. The heaviness of the summer air under the oak trees, and the pure and delicate presence of the girl at my side, made me forget the house we had left behind. The desire to express my admiration and love for her drove away all others.

But presently, speaking in an incredulous tone, she remarked:

'What a fool that son was. A drunkard - drunk night after night. The cavalry officers ruined him. But they'll hear nothing against him. They still believe he was kicked to death by a horse, but everyone knows he drove home drunk and was pitched out and broke his neck.'

And as we talked about him, and of the blind, pitiful faith of the parents, the opportunity to express what I felt for her slipped past again.

We returned to the house on the following afternoon. Again the July sunshine was warm and tranquil: again there lingered the same sense of peacefulness, and the house looked as asleep behind its flowers and cherry trees; once more the old man, his head among the geraniums, sat hunched and staring, and his wife answered his call in the same silent, timid way.

The cherries were ready. Christina put the money

## A LOVE STORY

into the woman's wrinkled yellow hand. While we were waiting for her to return with the change, the man bent forward and seized my sleeve.

'We forgot to show you this,' he said. He held out a riding-whip. A smile of pleasure and pride came over his face. The whip-lash was twisted about the handle, which was handsomely bound and mounted with silver and the leather was fresh and dry, and the silver brightly polished. The whip had never been used. I took it from him, and simultaneously he broke out, in the same half-proud half-weeping voice as before:

'The officers of the cavalry made him a present of it on his birthday. You see, they treated him like one of themselves.'

The woman returned. And again they poured out for us the story of their son. They repeated it like a catechism, droning, unaltered, with the same gestures, the same photographs, the same ribbons and medals, until it became unendurable to hear this reiteration of sadness and glory.

And then, as I still held the whip, I became conscious once again that the dark-haired girl had appeared in the doorway.

I glanced up at her. She was watching me. The expression on her face was gloomy and intense. Its grave dreaminess had gone, her body had lost its apathy, and I saw that her hands were clenched against her black dress. They were clenched rigidly, with an intensity of angry bitterness which gradually passed over her whole frame, until it possessed her lips and cheeks and rushed into her dark eyes, which she swung rapidly backwards and forwards from my own to the whip, and from the whip to the garrulous lips of the woman and her husband. Once or twice she started.

## A LOVE STORY

And then gradually the anger consumed her utterly, until she looked as though each word and each memory maddened and sickened her. At last there swept over her face a spasm of impatient fury, as if she thought the repetition of each word maudlin and hollow, as if she longed to snatch the whip from my hands and lash out for ever their blind, foolish faith in him and beat into them at last the truth of his degradation and death.

I gave back the whip into the old man's hands, and she could see it no longer, and when I looked up again her anger was already dying, her hands hung loose against her dress, and gradually, as her anger had done, a strange tranquillity possessed her, and after giving me one indefinable look of stoicism mingled with sadness, as if she were struggling against tears, she slipped away.

Presently I picked up the two baskets of dark cherries, and we said farewell and walked out of the house, across the garden, and so into the wood again.

We were silent. The wood, soundless also, full of a fragrance of trees and of hidden blossoms, stood over us like something watchful, infinite, everlasting.

All at once, attracted by some stir in the oak trees, Christina stopped, tilted back her head and gazed upward.

And I remember how I suddenly set down the cherries in the grass, hastily seized her hands and began to speak to her urgently and tenderly, overcome by a strange fear lest it should be too late.



## CHARLOTTE ESMOND

ESMOND'S, the cooked-meat shop, stood in a narrow street exactly opposite the back doors of an old variety theatre. In contrast to the drab walls pasted over with violent pictures of acrobats flying into the arms of operatic ladies, and of jugglers tossing green and yellow bottles over the heads of ravishing pink dancers, and still more in contrast to the performers themselves, who arrived with a rather cosmopolitan and dowdy air along with their faded properties on Sundays and Thursdays, Esmond's was prim, white and respectable.

The first performance at the theatre ended at half-past eight every evening. A few minutes before this a little woman would come into Esmond's from the room behind and carefully light the extra gas-lamp hanging over the white marble counter. She usually had on a neat white pinafore painted with little crimson rose-like buds and flowers. She was quick, dark-eyed and turning grey. There was an air of nervousness and prudence about the way in which she always surveyed for a moment the array of sausages, pies, smoked hams, polonies, blood-puddings and joints of stuffed pork displayed in the window. From her pensive and melancholy eyes she looked like a woman to whom suffering came readily, but always as something to be repressed and borne in silence. Long civility and servitude had left her face still delicate and gentle; there was a certain ladylike manner about her that made her lips appear for ever half-smiling. After this one glance at her meats and pies and another into the street, she

would dart away. A moment or two later a red and gold commissionaire would appear and fling back the doors of the theatre, and Charlotte Esmond would return carrying a hot grid of frizzling sausages, filling the shop with their savoury odour just in time to meet the first customers trooping in from the theatre.

Each night, for many years, as soon as the variety performance was over, the poor of the district had besieged Esmond's for hot sausages. Struggling, talking, coughing, rubbing their hands, they pressed against the counter and exchanged remarks with Mrs. Esmond as she served them. And Mrs. Esmond, although she resented their poverty, and dreamed of a shop in a residential quarter with appropriate delicacies in her window, had known them for so long that their lives seemed subtly entwined with her own.

As she served them the smile on her face never lessened or went away. Soon, as the opportunity arose, she asked a question.

'Well, and what was it like at the theatre tonight?' she would say.

Her voice was soft and refined, but it lacked familiarity; and the remark was only a habit of years.

'Oh! it was passable,' they would say. 'The conjurer was the best. Very smart. But the singing—well, I've heard some singing; a cat could sing better. But the conjurer was tip-top.'

She would nod in silence. Something in her honest, religious soul mistrusted conjurers.

'Wasn't there a juggler?' she would say.

Jugglers appealed to her. One could see all they were doing, one knew that their art was pure and straightforward. Unlike conjurers, they had no deceptions.



'No, there wasn't a juggler.'

'Oh!' she would say.

And then she would withdraw, like a snail to its shell, and wrap up sausages with courteous dexterity, and say no more.

Secretly she was very fond of the theatre, though she had never been since her husband's death. The theatre appealed to her by its tradition, by its interpretation of life, and again because of its rarefied atmosphere, its gaudy colours and romantic words. It seemed always a little finer and higher than life. In the same way she was fond of the church. But now she never went either to the theatre or to church. During the week she worked too hard and on Sundays she woke so tired out that she could hardly dress herself, and she was tired all day, too tired even to put on her best clothes and take a walk somewhere.

Saturday was a long day. Besides sausages she cooked a few special things such as savoury faggots and salted beef, which were set steaming in the window, and her work began much earlier and went on much later. As the hot, spicy steam filled the shop and the crowd of customers thickened, her brow would become clammy and at last she would pause a moment, wipe the sweat away, and gaze over the staring faces of her customers and apologize.

'Excuse me,' she would say, 'I shall just have to call Effie to come and help me.'

And fluttering quickly to the back of the shop she would draw aside the curtain of slatted green cane over the doorway and call:

'Effie! Effie! I shall be wanting you.'

Sometimes there would be no answer; more often a

voice would merely repeat in languid and resentful tones:

'Wanting me? Shall you? What for?'

That was all. Charlotte would return to the counter, recommend the steaming beef again, wrap up her black puddings, count out her sausages and answer remarks without ever letting the smile on her face relax or become dull. No Effie would appear however, and at last Charlotte would lay down her knife and call again:

'Effie! Effie! Can't you come?'

'Perhaps she's 'aving a bath,' some wit would say.

Charlotte would try to quell the laughter.

'Please don't laugh - it encourages her - she'll never come if you laugh.'

And she would try something between insistence and cajolery:

'Effie dear, do try and come!'

At last, after more entreaties, a white shape, rather characterless and expansive and languid, would move backwards and forwards in the dim light behind the screen; and presently, like a fat white cloud drifting slowly into view, Effie would appear.

After a disdainful look or two at her mother and the customers, the girl would sidle to the counter and begin to serve. Her manner of serving was to jerk up her head with something between pride and hostility, as if mortally insulted, in the direction of the nearest customer, and then turn languidly away to cut beef or ham or spoon up hot faggots - neither the fixed hostility of her glance nor her patronizing silence ever broken. As she moved stiffly to and fro, she resembled some big, fair-haired doll made of pink and white china. There was something also about her large blue

eyes that was hard and cold; all the hyper-sensitive superiority of her being was centred there. At times they seemed also to fill with shame, the horrid, demeaning shame with which she felt the work in that shop covered her. She hated it, she shrank from it, she was too good for it. And she would use her fingers daintily, like a lady, keeping the customers waiting and handing over the food at last as if it were contaminated.

Charlotte Esmond was puzzled and unhappy about her daughter. As a child the girl had been plump and pretty, but as soon as her childhood was past she developed with alarming rapidity and became stout and strangely indolent. Her face was puffy and white; her bust was like a pillow. Pretty dresses and vivid colours did not suit her. She rarely walked out. People laughed at her. Hadn't she even seen them laughing in the shop? And she hated them for it, protecting herself with a cold reserve which seemed to them only a sort of insolent pride.

A little reasoning from Charlotte made her weep at once. The mother took the problem of the girl about with her, troubled continually. Sons found their way out into the world and were a blessing, she thought, even in absence. But she felt that Effie would never find her way.

On the other hand, Effie herself was constantly reading and dreaming of her future, poring alternately over cheap novels and the works of Scott.

The room behind the shop was large but dark. Its one window looked on a narrow yard, in which stood an old outhouse with broken windows. A frail rhododendron bush had tried for many years to flourish in a green tub set on an iron tank, but flowers had never

come, and the plant seemed to make no fresh leaves and would have been better dead. But Effie still hoped for its blossoms, just as she hoped for romance as she reclined on the rickety American-leather sofa under the window and watched it.

Nothing approaching love had ever touched her. Her thoughts of love were naive, chaste, beautiful. Perfection, to her, lay in someone who would overlook her stoutness and idolize her and hurry her away from the shop and the eternal odour of steaming meat and the people who laughed at her. Where such a person was she did not know; she could not imagine; but the dreamy pursuit of this elusive figure kept her from dejection.

## II

Charlotte had also three sons. They were big, ambitious, industrious fellows, and they resembled their father at the age when he had wooed her with a slow, persistent love which had at length induced her to leave the milliner's where she was apprenticed and start in a cooked-meat business with him. They had grown up with a loathing for their father's business. She was not sorry. She knew they were really fitted by their persistence and cleverness for something better, and secretly she had encouraged the experiments in chemistry and mechanical things which as boys they had conducted in the outhouse in the yard. They must be great, better, different, she was always thinking. She was almost pitifully ambitious for them. Once a week she found them a little money for experiments. She taught them a revulsion for the cheap meat they sold and the neighbourhood in which they lived. And

when they decided to emigrate it was she who encouraged them, found the money, and wept over them. They were now in America, quite successful, sending her a letter and a little money from time to time, and the two youngest were about to be married.

She missed the mere masculine presence of them deeply. From a practical point of view there was need for a man in the shop. Effie did little but think and read and wait, and was short of breath and had fainting fits over the pastry-board if she worked too hard. Charlotte vaguely thought of employing a man. But she wanted an honest, trustworthy man, a juggler not a conjurer.

She knew of no one. She had few friends. Work had given her little leisure, and the shop tied her, body and soul. She was too proud to entertain in their one dark room, with its broken sofa and eternal reek of cooking meat and spices, and its view over the dismal yard and the factory chimneys blacking out half the sky beyond. She was also inclined to be resigned, almost fatalistic, about her lot. If God had placed her there, she must remain; when it was time to change or move or die no doubt God would say so; and whatever was to happen, would happen. One knew no more.

Once a week, however, they received a visit from an old acquaintance. In the old days he had come in a pony-trap; now he owned a small green two-seater. As soon as they heard the horn, they knew who was coming and sat up.

‘Victor Henryson!’

Charlotte would wipe her greasy or floury hands on her apron, Effie would untie the strings, the bell would ring, and Charlotte would flutter into the shop to chat with their old friend the credit-draper.

He always greeted her with a suave and rather mocking bow which was the key to her faint distrust of him. He was a little man, plump and dapper, with a smart chestnut moustache and a keen fresh red complexion. He dressed in dark blue suits, thinly striped with grey, with a little blue-and-white spotted handkerchief, which added the last touch to his slightly affected person, always peeping loosely from his breast. He was almost her own age, but he had kept himself fresh and youthful. For Charlotte however there had always been something oily and over-affable about him, and she mistrusted the way he always greeted her:

‘Well, and how is the world using our little milliner?’

To her annoyance she was always the little milliner to him. He had known her first as an apprentice; but she detected something mocking in the remembrance. And she would reply coolly:

‘Well, I am still here.’

‘Oh! Don’t be dismal,’ he would say. ‘Surely we can do something for you? Surely there’s a little piece of something that would gladden your heart? Some new bird-feather trimmings, now! Don’t say “No”. I can tell you’re aching to see them.’

‘No really, really –’

He would run to the car and return laden with boxes. She would still protest. She had no money. He was also a great gossip; she would never be rid of him.

But as soon as her eyes alighted on the feathers, green, white, purple, gold, black and scarlet, the shop would seem gayer, and she would begin to turn them over, timidly at first, but rapidly with excitement,

smoothing and brushing them with her finger-tips, even sniffing them and pressing them to her pale cheeks. Memories of her girlhood and youth would overcome her, the bright-coloured feathers would seem to be the very symbols of past happiness mingled with unrealized and half-forgotten things, and at last she would succumb.

'You know,' she would say, half playfully, as she found her purse and gave him the money, 'you want shooting.'

'Oh! be honest — is it I, or the feathers?'

'Oh! go along with you!'

'But is it now?'

'Why you, of course — you'd turn the head of a stone statue.'

It was this persuasiveness which she mistrusted and disliked, but which she found irresistible, the power to make her talk for an hour when the pies were waiting, or to buy a piece of primrose chiffon or an emerald feather which she knew she would never use. Each time she bought something from him she bought unwillingly, against her own judgment and her own heart, and yet she liked talking to him, however grudgingly she did it and however foolish and unprofitable she knew it to be. She envied him for having kept his youth while she had lost hers. She was faintly jealous of the air of gentility he had been able to preserve. Her own had so long ago been crushed and dissipated.

Invariably when she talked to him the problem of Effie came up. Effie was becoming the bane of her life, utterly incompetent and thankless, more and more a creature of indolence and stubborn pride.

'I don't know,' Charlotte would say to him, 'what is

the matter with her? Can you tell? She just sits still, and yet she's dissatisfied. She's discontented with everything. She wants something. I know that - I know she wants something. But what? If I ask her she won't answer.'

'What if she shouldn't know?' he asked.

'How - how can that be? I always knew what I wanted.'

'Perhaps Effie is different.'

'Do you understand her then?'

'Effie is different - that's all I understand.'

'Yes, but what's to be done?'

'Let her dream,' he would say. 'She must have her dreams.'

'But can't you find her something to do?' she would cry. 'If only you pay her enough for her train-fare each day and her dinner - she doesn't eat much - it will be something. She will have started. You see? She will have started.'

But the draper and his wife managed everything between themselves, and there was no chance of an opening for Effie. He could only occasionally bring her a pillow-slip of oddments, faulty silk stockings, underclothes, lengths of cheap lace and flowered prints and braids, on which she could make a little profit when she resold them to women in the shop.

And this he did. The lots of oddments went easily. Effie seemed to like the idea; and Charlotte was delighted. Charlotte with her experience decided the prices and Effie took the whole profits, and the next bag of oddments became a great event.

That springtime, however, he ceased suddenly to call on them. They were mystified and hurt, and wondered how it could be. With the weekly oddments no



longer interesting her, Effie became lower in spirits, and did nothing again but dream and wait. Charlotte felt bitterly towards Henryson, as if he had cheated them.

Effie decided at last to go to his shop in the next town and see him. She returned with a peculiar, far-away, chastened look on her face. She was to say that he lacked all heart to come and see them. He would come soon. But now he could not face them. His wife had died. Effie was strangely touched, and without knowing if it were for Henryson or his wife, she cried in the train, full of pity, and again when she told the news to her mother.

Charlotte's pity was of a dumb, oppressive kind, but, unlike Effie, she knew whom she pitied. She became aware of a searching compassion for Henryson, and could not turn her thoughts away from him. She wanted to express her feelings for him, but he still never came to see them, and after some weeks she wrote him a letter.

Soon after this letter he came. He was dressed in black and hardly seemed as plump as before and was content rather to be spoken to than speak. He had not been crushed. Death had only cheated him, taking him unawares; it had not tortured and revolutionized him with its pain. Beneath his moody seriousness, like his body beneath his black clothes, he remained the same.

Nevertheless Charlotte was filled with tenderness for him. When she looked at his black-clothed figure, so sober and unnatural, and noticed the same blue and white spotted handkerchief peeping as of old from his breast, she was sorry and wanted to weep for him.

He came a second time and she invited him to have

tea with them, and it made her heart lighter to see him eating and to hear him talk to Effie. She felt that he had changed. His jauntiness was absent; his eyes were no longer mocking, and she never saw one glimpse of the oily persuasiveness she so mistrusted and disliked.

He lingered until darkness, until the shop was lighted, and only went reluctantly. When the shop was closed Effie brought out a beautiful length of dark reddish velvet he had given her, soft and luxurious and with a bloom on its face like a ripening plum. Charlotte was dazzled. She held it up, draped it into folds, spread it out like a beautiful shadow.

'And he's given it to you? Given it you?' she could only ask, astounded.

The girl nodded and clasped the velvet in her hands. Charlotte was brought to a decision about him.

'He's so nice – so much nicer,' she said. 'He used to be so superior and he always talked so boastingly and mockingly. But you know he's changed. He's quieter, more sincere, quite different.'

The girl did not answer, but crushed the velvet against her bosom before putting it away.

### III

Spring came. The rhododendron began to show cones of pale green among its blackened leaves, and Charlotte and Effie began to hope for flowers. The draper came one afternoon and spent a long time putting fresh soil in the tub. He explained to them that it was wood-soil, the dark loam of hundreds of years, which he had stopped to gather from the woods as he drove over to see them. The woods were in full

garland, decked out with primroses and hyacinths and windflowers and the shy white wood-violets that give themselves away by their very sweetness. He had come to ask if they would drive out and gather flowers with him.

The shop was shut at noon on the following day. Charlotte had not been for a drive for years, since the early days of the motor car, and she wrapped herself up in many scarves and an old veil. Her excitement was almost childish, but Effie was ready quickly, strangely tranquil, with a kind of becalming certitude about her.

The day was brilliant with spring blue and sunniness. They bowled along rapidly out of the town, Charlotte sitting silent and transfixed beside the draper. She half forgot Effie in watching the green country unfolding and in looking for primroses in the open spaces between the birch trees. In her happiness she had already begun to attach importance to things the draper said to her, to odd moments when he had talked about the loneliness of his life and his need for companionship. When she thought of him the old need for a masculine presence about her was aroused again. They drove on, mile after mile, into deeper woodland. She could see the bluebells running like a light blue flame over the dark earth. Where she had once distrusted him, she found it impossible to repeat his name without pleasure. Why was that? Wasn't she too old for such thoughts, wasn't it silly, wasn't it an illusion, wasn't it false? By and by the car came to a standstill by a little clearing. Over the earth were blowing and dancing delicate windflowers, white and mauve, flowing back among the trees like pale streams and cascading into hollows and over banks like purest snow, ceaselessly dancing and shining.

The draper and Effie threaded their way among the streaming whiteness of the flowers. Charlotte came behind very flushed, unwinding her many scarves and her old mauve veil.

Effie and Henryson began to pick the flowers, stooping and walking slowly on together. She had no desire to pluck flowers, and knew that the anemones would droop, and she called out:

'No, no, don't pick them. They droop so soon. Only just sit still and watch them.'

Henryson looked up, displaying a nosegay already. 'Aren't you coming?' he called. 'Farther on there'll be primroses and bluebells.'

She shook her head. 'I only want to sit and watch,' she called. 'It's a good long time since I saw a wood in spring.'

She spread out her coat and sat under a birch tree and watched the trembling sheet of windflowers in the sunshine. This was all she asked. To sit and watch; to think; to be alone with herself; to be conscious of nothing but the windflowers and the sky. As she sat there, however, her heart as if in contradiction began to long for the draper also. She glanced up at him, as he squatted among the flowers in a new grey suit. Was it foolish at her age, with grown-up sons, to hope for the thoughts of a girl? Effie and the draper wandered off, following the pale tributaries of flowers. Soon she heard in the hush of the afternoon Effie's voice calling, 'Primroses - Look at them! - Primroses!' but she did not rise, the wood grew silent about her and she fell a prey to her thoughts again. And gradually she wove about her the fabrication of life as it might be, how she would marry the draper, help in the business she loved and leave the shop for ever.

She sat thinking of the happiness this would bring her. She felt still strong, mature, capable of love. She was like an old instrument; she would play if someone touched her. She closed her eyes, steeped in a blissful expectation of his return and of a love without which she felt unable to go on with the petty monotony of life as she had lived it for so long.

She got to her feet at last, afraid of the damp earth. The sun had dazzled her. The windflowers seemed to burst about her into a white flame. She began to walk down the slopes, up and down and onwards through young birches and half-budded oaks and swaying whips of hazel, meeting the primroses drifting up from the dark hollows and seeing the stains of turquoise that were the bluebells on the ridge beyond. With the spring sunshine and the scent and the prospect of summer about her she felt an atom of girlish ecstasy awake and warm her blood, as if it had lain for years in the darkness of her unconscious womanhood.

She walked slowly, along a narrow path which occasionally ran into an opening yellow with primroses. She could neither see nor hear Effie and the draper.

As she walked into a hollow of primroses splashed with blue and the deep gold of oxlips, she noticed something white, and stopped, and saw Effie's dress. The girl lay stretched among the primroses, looking up through the trees at the sky. She lay clasping the draper against her breast, kissing him; and the draper in return was murmuring and showering kisses too on her fat arms and lips and breast.

She retreated. Horrified and trembling, she sat down under a birch tree again, and for a moment she clung to the past, to her illusions and to the expectation of another existence which had meant so much to her.

But soon she let everything collapse, able to think of nothing but how vulgar and sordid it was to her, how she hated them both, how she would do all in her power to obstruct and defile and destroy their love and plunge them into that same unhappiness into which she herself was sinking.

## I V

For some weeks she hated Henryson. All her distrust for him returned. It was against her nature to forgive deceit and falsity; and she soured against him.

But after a week or two, this vindictiveness gradually gave way to something calmer – the same resignation as before, and to the old belief in the will of God and fate. It had happened: what could change that? What was to happen, would happen. And she induced herself to sink into a kind of indifference about them, trying to shut her eyes to their love.

There remained still a blackness of disappointment and loss in her, but she smothered it. Summer came, and Effie and the draper began to drive out together in the little green car, and the whole town knew of their attachment. She did not care. What they did, they did, and so it remained.

One day Henryson came to her and asked if he might marry Effie. She was prepared, and she received him calmly.

‘You can marry her,’ she said, too proud to show her grief, ‘but not for a year, and only then if you’ve courted her properly.’

She still nursed some dark, primitive idea of thwarting him. In a year, who knows, it might be forgotten?

But as the summer went on she could see how antagonistic they were towards her. Effie was prouder and more distant than ever. She openly said sharp and bitter things to her mother, and she often looked at her as if to say: 'What right have you to be so selfish and narrow about us?'

Finally, in July, they were married secretly. Charlotte felt bewildered and wretched and reproached herself continually.

They did not come to see her until two months after their wedding. When they came Effie was slimmer and more shapely, as if married life and the change of environment and fresh work suited her. She looked happy; she was already going to have a baby. Underneath her pale-green coat with primrose buttons and milk-white fur she was wearing a dress of chicory blue with a white girdle. She looked very attractive, and Charlotte saw that the draper took a pride in her and cared for her.

They had come to ask if she would help when the baby came. After she had promised they went away hurriedly and did not come back again until the pregnancy was five or six months old.

She grew used to her loneliness. She tried not to think much of Henryson and Effie.

The customers, however, liked to talk. 'Well,' they would say, 'and how is Effie?'

She generally knew nothing. That gave them a chance. Charlotte would be told the news.

'They've a new car, didn't you know? Yes, it's blue, a lovely thing with corded blinds and silver fittings for flowers. And they say she's going to have a baby. Is that so?'

'Yes, in the summer.'

'Perhaps that'll do her good – she needed something like that.'

'I think perhaps she did.'

'Yes. A pound of sausages.'

'Pork or tomato?'

'Pork, if you've got them. A baby is often the salvation of a girl like her. And a half a black pudding. They say she's changed already. Let's hope she'll come through it well.'

'I only hope so.'

The baby began to play an important part in her life; she was constantly thinking of it, imagining what it would be like, devising names and clothes for it as if it had been her own. Her bitterness and loneliness and hatred of Henryson were nullified when she thought of the baby. It seemed to embody her hopes and renew her fortitude and make life acceptable again.

When it was born she was unutterably glad at the sight of its tiny, red, crumpled face, and she found it marvellously consoling and beautiful to go about thinking of the child.

When she had nursed Effie she returned home, and then twice a week the girl and the baby came to stay with her while the draper drove to the villages to collect the weekly debts.

The girl had changed. Bearing the child had made her slim and there was a certain beauty about her pale figure without its gross curves and insipid indolence. She was already indulging a love of lavish green and blue and yellow dresses, as she had always longed to do. Seeing her, Charlotte's envy awoke, and Henryson began slowly to mean nothing to her. As the girl sat on the American sofa talking to her baby or feeding



it from her big white breasts, still almost virgin and tender, Charlotte was jealous of her, and the desire for creation in her would awake and fret her until she longed to take the child from its mother and suckle it too.

Later in the summer Effie and the draper began to drive out together to the villages and leave the baby alone with her all day. When she moved from the kitchen to the shop she wheeled the baby with her. She could not be separated from it. She felt as if her spirit were being infused with the child's, and lived utterly in the days when the baby was left alone with her.

She had the baby one afternoon in the kitchen, when she was rolling out pastry on a long table. Bowls of pepper and the dark wooden moulds for the pies stood in a row. An enormous black iron pot of chitterlings was boiling on the stove; a heap of raw pork stood ready for the pies.

As she rolled and moulded the yellowish pastry she talked to the child. He looked fixedly up at her from his pink and cream carriage, with soft black eyes, as if he understood.

'You dare look so, you beauty! Rascal! You know all about it! What is it then, who is it?' She put her face close to the child's. The child murmured and smiled. 'Ah! he knows. What should we do without him? He's so lovely, my little one. Heaven knows what we should do without him.'

The bell rang in the shop. Wiping her floured hands on her pinafore she ran off, still calling to the baby as she ran.

The customer was anxious to talk.

'So you've got the baby again? You like that, I'll be

bound? One small pork chop. Does he grow? Effie's changed – I hardly know her. Quite small – my husband's never in to dinner and I don't eat a stock. Are you well?"

'Oh! I've never been so well. I like the baby about me. He's a companion to me.'

'You'll spoil him.'

Charlotte smiled with guilt and happiness. 'He's spoilt already,' she confessed. 'We all spoil him.' She cut the pork chop skilfully.

Suddenly Charlotte stood alert, like a hare.

'I heard something!'

The women stood tense and listening.

They heard a faint sound, a sound of escaping steam, and then a terrible cry. Hearing the scream of the child Charlotte threw down her knife and rushed into the kitchen. Scalding water was pouring over the child's face from the meat-pot. The carriage had slipped on. But the baby had ceased screaming when she arrived. There was no sound but a faint growling in the pot and a hiss of steam.

## V

After the child had died, Charlotte was left alone. The draper and Effie did not come to see her.

She closed the shop every Thursday, put on black clothes, and went to the cemetery. She spent a long time trimming the grass, watering the soil and arranging chrysanthemums at the head of the tiny mound. After a time the keeper came to know her, and she to recognize the same faces week after week, and gradually she gained a sort of happiness from it all.

She came home very tired one Thursday, and found a letter awaiting her. She sat down on the broken sofa overlooking the narrow yard and read it.

The shop-bell rang as she was reading. She lifted her head from her hands, slowly dried her moist eyes, and then went to answer.

A little boy stood at the counter. He searched for the money in the pocket of his blue blouse and looked up at her.

'A polony, please,' he said. His voice was timid. He stretched out his hand.

To Charlotte he looked like a small pink ghost. His eyes never left her. His childish stare, as he watched her pick out the fat red sausage and wrap it up for him, contained such a profundity of trust and belief in her that she felt she must talk to him. She placed the sausage on the counter and smoothed his hair and said:

'Do you know, I'm going to America.'

He did not appear to understand. He seemed to contract into a faint mistrust of her. He said nothing, and she repeated what she had said:

'I'm going to America. Don't you know where that is?'

He shook his head, still regarding her.

'Not America?' She pressed his two cheeks with her hands. 'You don't know?'

'No,' he said

'It's over the sea, a long way, I don't know how far.'

She could feel his trust for her ebbing away. His face seemed to slip through her fingers. His eyes were distant and half afraid.

He thought a moment, looking uneasy, and then asked:

'What are you going for?'

She shook her head. What was she going for?  
The answer came to her lips half instinctively.  
'I don't know.'

There was a pause again. He searched her with his eyes and seemed to ponder over her.

'Don't you want to go?' he said.

And the same answer started from her:

'I don't know, I don't know.'

He became more than ever like a pinkish-white ghost; she could discern only his small bright eyes fixed upon her with perplexity. He had now no faith in her. He stood a little away from the counter, hesitant and uneasy, gently critical of her with all his childish contempt and suspicion of grown-up tears.

Suddenly she could bear his stare no longer, and with an abrupt movement gave him the sausage, took his money and let him depart. Before withdrawing she saw him still watching her with curiosity, his little steadfast face a white blur in the falling dusk beyond the window.

She retired to the living-room, sat on the sofa and again read the letter her sons had sent asking her to go away. The house seemed stuffy and smelled of years of cooked meat. It was nauseating and loathsome, this smell, representing everything that had been worthless and ugly in her life – all that which had been colourless and had come to nothing. It was already too dark for her to decipher the letter. Instead she sat there with the child's naive words going to the root of her being again: 'What are you going for? Don't you want to go?' And, as before, she was at a loss for an answer. As the autumn afternoon faded, its primrose driven away by gold and tawny orange and the first purplish red of darkness, she thought of America again and

again, and the thought of being uprooted frightened her. Could she go? How far was it? How many miles? The uncertainty of an unknown, far-off world, and the slightest tremor at the roots which bound her to the place where she had come as a young wife and where she now sat alone appalled her.

There remained at last only a scrap of blue in the sky, pale as a hyacinth, fledged by a ring of clouds as pure and delicate as flowers of snow. As darkness came on, she took her candle and chopped her kindling and laid a fire in the copper, ready for the following day.

Finally she sat down and by and by, in the gaslight, read her letter again. All at once it was as if she fell into a dream; the past had come back, her sons were still with her, she had never loved the draper and the child had never died. She was going away; she was going to uproot herself. Life would be different. There was a marvellous happiness awaiting her. She was never coming back again.

And as suddenly it vanished. She got up quickly, put away her letter and set about grilling the sausages.

Punctually at half-past eight she carried them into the crowded shop, saw the same faces as ever and heard the same voices, skilfully slid off the steaming sausages, and asked her usual question:

‘Well, and what was it like at the theatre tonight?’

And with the same gentle, ladylike smile she listened to the babble of friendly voices. And while she listened she kept telling herself that perhaps after all it was the Will of God that what was to happen would happen, and that when it was time to change or move or die it would be so. One knew no more.



## A FLOWER PIECE

THE blackthorn tree stooped over the high bank above the road. Its branches were clouded with white blossom and the spring sunlight threw lace-like patterns on the earth that had been trodden bare underneath the tree. The grass of the bank was scattered with big, pale-blue violets and stars of colts-foot and daisies very like chance blackthorn blossoms that the wind had shaken down. In the hedge behind the blackthorn were companies of pale-green lords-and-ladies that had thrust up their unfurled hoods through a thicket of dog's-mercury. They looked cold and stately. The sunlight was sharp and brilliant and against the blue of the sky the blackthorn tree was whiter than a summer cloud.

On the road below stood a row of cottages and in the back gardens wives were beating carpets and gossiping. A clergyman rode by on a bicycle, carrying *The Times* and a bunch of daffodils. A blackbird squawked and dipped across the road and vanished into a spinney of hazels as he passed.

A girl of seven or eight was sitting under the blackthorn. The tree was so twisted and stooping that she sat there in a kind of room, shut in by a roof and walls of blossoming branches. It was very sweet and snug there on the dry floor in the freckling sunlight. She had taken off her pinafore and had spread it across the earth and had set in the centre of it a tin that had once held peaches. In the tin she was arranging flowers among ivy leaves and grasses. She had put in celandines and dog-violets and coltsfoot and a single

dandelion, with a spray or two of blackthorn. She arched her fingers very elegantly and sat back to admire the effects. She had fair, smooth hair, and she had made a daisy chain to bind round her forehead. It gave her a very superior and ladylike air which was not lost on her.

Presently she ceased arranging the flowers and began to smooth her dress and polish her finger-nails on her palms, lingering over them for a long time. At last there was a movement in a hawthorn bush a little distance away and a voice called quietly:

'Do I have to come in now?'

The girl looked up in the direction of the voice.

'You have to wait till I tell you,' she whispered sharply.

And then in a totally strange voice, very high-pitched and affected, like the voice of a stage duchess, she sang out:

'I'm at my toilet, my dear. An awful nuisance. Do excuse me.'

'I see.'

'Only a moment! I'm still in my *déshabillé*.'

She began to make hurried imaginary movements of slipping in and out of garments. Finally she undid two buttons at the bodice of her dress and turned back the bodice of her dress, revealing her naked chest. She looked down at herself in admiration, breathing heavily once or twice, so that her bosom rose and fell very languidly and softly. She gave one last touch to the flowers in the peach-tin and then whispered:

'You can come in now. Act properly.'

Another child came out of hiding and stood outside the hawthorn tree. She was a brown, shy, unassuming creature, about six or seven, with beautiful dark eyes



that reflected the dazzling whiteness of the sloe blossom so perfectly that they took fresh light from it. Her voice was curiously soft and timid and whispering.

'Do I have to come straight in?' she said.

'You have to be in the garden first. You look at the flowers and then you ring and the servant comes.'

'Oh! what lovely may,' said the other child, talking softly to herself.

'It's not may! It's lilac.'

'Oh! What lovely lilac. Oh! dear, what lovely lilac.'

She pulled down a branch of blossom and caressed it with her cheek. It was very sweet and she sighed. She acted very charmingly, and finally she rang the bell and the servant came.

'May I see Mrs. Lane?'

'Not Mrs. Lane,' came an awful whisper. 'Lady Constance. You're Mrs. Lane.'

'Is Lady Constance in?'

'Will you go into the drawing-room?'

She stooped and went through a space in the black-thorn branches. The fair child for a moment did not notice her. She had broken off a thorn and she was absorbed in stitching imaginary embroideries very delicately. Suddenly she glanced up with a most perfect exclamation of well-mannered surprise.

'My dear Mrs. Lane! It is Mrs. Lane, isn't it?'

'Yes.'

'How sweet of you to come. Won't you sit down? I'll ring for tea. You must be tired.' Ting-a-ling-a-ling! 'Oh! Jane, will you bring tea 'at once, please? Thank you. Oh! do sit down, won't you?'

'Where do I sit?' said the brown child.

'On the floor, silly!' whispered the fair girl. 'Oh! do take the settee, won't you?'

'I was admiring your lovely may,' said the brown child.

'The lilac? Oh! yes, wouldn't you like to take some?'

'Oh! Yes. May I?'

She began to crawl through the break in the branches again. Instantly the fair child was furious.

'You don't have to do that until I tell you,' she whispered. 'Come back and sit down now. Oh! yes, of course,' she said aloud. 'I'll tell the gardener to cut you some.'

The brown-eyed child crept back under the tree and sat down. She looked very meek and solemn and embarrassed, as though she were really in a drawing-room and did not know what to do with her hands. The fair child was acting superbly, not one accent or gesture out of place. The maid arrived with the tea and the fair one said with perfect sweetness:

'Milk and sugar?'

The dark child had become busy with hidden knots, her frock uplifted, and she did not hear. The fair-haired child took one look at her and became furious again.

'Put your clothes down,' she whispered terribly. 'You're showing all you've got.'

'I can't help it. It's my knickers. I want some new elastic.'

'But you mustn't do it. Not in the drawing-room. We're ladies!'

'Ladies do it.'

'Ladies don't do it! Ladies have to sit nice and talk nice and behave themselves.'

The brown-eyed child surrendered. She looked as though she were bored and bewildered by the attentions of the fair child and by the prospect of being a

lady. She was constantly glancing with an expression of quiet longing at the blackthorn blossom, the blue sky and the flowers arranged in the peach-tin.

'Milk and sugar?' repeated the fair child.

'Oh! yes please.'

There were no teacups, but the fair child had gathered a heap of stones for cakes. The brown child sat with a stone in her hand. The other took a cake between her finger-tips and made elegant bites and munched with a sweetish smile. She made small talk to perfection, and when she drank her tea she extended her little finger. Finally she observed that the dark child was neither eating nor drinking. She looked at her as if she had committed unpardonable sins in etiquette.

'Aren't you having any tea?' she said icily.

The brown-eyed child looked startled and then declared timidly:

'I don't want to play this game.'

'Why don't you want to play?'

The brown child did not answer. All the dignity of the fair child at once vanished. She made a gesture as though it were difficult to bear all the shortcomings of the younger child.

'All because you can't act,' she said tartly.

'Let's go out and get violets and be real people.'

'We are real people. You play so silly. You aren't old enough to understand.'

The brown-eyed child looked acutely depressed. Suddenly she dropped the stone and began to creep out disconsolately from under the blackthorn tree. The fair child adopted a new, cajoling tone.

'It's easy,' she said. 'You only have to put it on a bit and you're a lady. We can start again and you can be a duchess. Come on.'

## A FLOWER PIECE

The dark child looked back for a moment very dubiously, as though it were too much to believe, and then walked away up the bank. The other child sniffed and tossed her head with fierce pride and called out:

'You needn't think you can come back here now you've gone.'

Without answering, the brown-eyed child walked away behind the hawthorn trees and by the hedge at the top of the bank. She became lost in a world of dog's-mercury and budding hawthorn and pale violets. She came upon primrose buds and finally a cluster of opened primroses and a bed of white anemones. Talking to herself, she gathered flowers and leaves and put them in her hair, as the fair girl had done.

The fair child crept out from under the blackthorn tree. She had tucked her frock in her pale blue-knickers and she stood upright on her toes, like a ballet-dancer. She broke off a spray of blackthorn and held it with both hands above her head and then twirled on her toes and did high kicks and waltzed majestically round and round the blackthorn tree. Now and then she broke out and sang to herself. She introduced a stage vibrato into her voice and she danced about the blackthorn tree to the tune she made, acting perfectly.

Finally the brown-haired child came down the bank again. She saw the fair child dancing and she suddenly conceived a desire to dance too. She stood by the tree and waited. The fair girl saw her.

'You needn't come here!' she sneered.

A spasm of sadness crossed the face of the dark child. She turned and descended the bank very slowly, sometimes pausing and looking backward and then edging

## A FLOWER PIECE

unwillingly away. Finally, with the primroses and the single anemone still shining in her hair, she reached the road and walked slowly away and disappeared.

When she had gone there was nothing left to interrupt the gaiety of the dancing child, the flowers about the earth and the blackthorn tree scattering its shower of lovely stars.



## THE MOWER

**I**N the midday heat of a June day a farm-boy was riding down a deserted meadow-lane, straddling a fat white pony. The blossoms of hawthorn had shrivelled to brown on the tall hedges flanking the lane and wild pink and white roses were beginning to open like stars among the thick green leaves. The air was heavy with the scent of early summer, the odour of the dying hawthorn bloom, the perfume of the dog-roses, the breath of ripening grass.

The boy had taken off his jacket and had hooked it over the straw victual-bag hanging from the saddle. There were bottles of beer in the bag and the jacket shaded them from the heat of the sun. The pony moved at walking-pace and the boy rode cautiously, never letting it break into a trot. As though it was necessary to be careful with the beer, he sometimes halted the pony and touched the necks of the bottles with his fingers. The bottlenecks were cool, but the cloth of his jacket was burning against his hand.

He presently steered the pony through a white gate leading from the lane to a meadow beyond. The gate was standing open and he rode the pony straight across the curving swathes of hay which lay drying in the sun. It was a field of seven or eight acres and a third of the grass had already been mown. The hay was crisp and dry under the pony's feet and the flowers that had been growing in the grass lay white and shrivelled in the sunshine.

Over on the far side of the field a man was mowing, and a woman was turning the rows of grass with a hay-

rake. The figure of the man was nondescript and dark, and the woman was dressed in a white blouse and an old green skirt that had faded to the yellowish colour of the grass the man was mowing. The boy rode the pony towards them. The sunshine blazed down, fierce and perpendicular, and there was no shade in the field except for the shadow of an ash tree in one corner and a group of willows by a cattle-pond in another.

Everywhere was silence and the soft sound of the pony's feet in the hay and the droning of bees in the flowers among the uncut grass seemed to deepen the silence.

The woman straightened her back and, leaning on her rake, shaded her face with her hand and looked across at the boy as she heard him coming. The man went on mowing, swinging the scythe slowly and methodically, his back towards her.

The woman was dark and good-looking, with a sleek swarthy face and very high, soft red cheek-bones, like a gipsy, and a long pigtail of thick black hair which she wore twisted over her head like a snake coiled up asleep. She herself was rather like a snake also, her long body slim and supple, her black eyes liquid and bright. The boy rode up to her and dismounted. She dropped her rake and held the pony's head and ran her fingers up and down its nose while he slipped from the saddle.

'Can he come?' she said.

The boy had not time to answer before the man approached, wiping the sweat from his face and neck with a dirty red handkerchief. His face was broad and thick-lipped and ponderous, his eyes were grey and simple, and the skin of his face and neck and hands was dried and tawny as an Indian's with sun and



weather. He was about forty, and he walked with a slight stoop of his shoulders and a limp of his left leg, very slowly and deliberately.

'See him?' he said to the boy.

'He was up there when I got the beer,' the boy said.

'In the Dragon? What did he say?'

'He said he'd come.'

The woman ceased stroking the pony's nose and looked up.

'He said that yesterday,' she said.

'Ah! but you can't talk to him. He's got to have his own way,' said the man. 'Was he drunk?' he asked.

'I don't think so,' said the boy. 'He was drunk yesterday.'

The man wiped his neck impatiently and made a sound of disgust and then took out his watch. 'Half the day gone – and a damn wonder if he comes,' he muttered.

'Oh! if Ponto says he'll come,' said the woman slowly, 'he'll come. He'll come all right.'

'How do you know? He does things just when he thinks he will – and not until.'

'Oh! He'll come if he says he'll come,' she said.

The boy began to lead the pony across the field towards the ash tree. The woman stood aside for him and then kicked her rake on a heap of hay and followed him.

The sun had crossed the zenith. The man went back to his scythe and slipped his whetstone from his pocket and laid it carefully on the mown grass. As he put on his jacket he turned and gazed at the white gate of the field. He could see no one there, and he followed the woman and the boy across the field to the ash tree.

Under the ash tree the boy was tethering the horse

in the shade and the woman was unpacking bread and cold potatoes and a meat pie. The boy had finished tethering the horse as the man came up and he was covering over the bottles of beer with a heap of hay. The sight of the beer reminded the man of something.

'You told him the beer was for him? he asked.

'He asked me whose it was and I told him what you said,' the boy replied.

'That's all right.'

He began to unfold the sack in which the blade of his scythe had been wrapped. He spread out the sack slowly and carefully on the grass at the foot of the ash trunk and let his squat body sink down upon it heavily. The boy and the woman seated themselves on the grass at his side. He unhooked the heavy soldier's knife hanging from his belt, and unclasped it and wiped it on his trousers knee. The woman sliced the pie. The man took his plateful of pie and bread and potatoes on his knee, and spitting his sucking-pebble from his mouth began spearing the food with the point of his knife, eating ravenously. When he did not eat with his knife he ate with his fingers, grunting and belching happily. The woman finished serving the pie, and sucking a smear of gravy from her long fingers, began to eat too.

During the eating no one spoke. The three people stared at the half-mown field. The curves of the scythed grass were beginning to whiten in the blazing sunshine. The heat shimmered and danced above the earth in the distance in little waves.

Before long the man wiped his plate with a piece of bread and swilled down his food with long drinks of cold tea from a blue can. When he had finished drinking, his head lolled back against the ash tree and

he closed his eyes. The boy lay flat on his belly, reading a sporting paper while he ate. The air was stifling and warm even under the ash tree, and there was no sound in the noon stillness, except the clink of the horse's bit as it pulled off the young green leaves of the hawthorn hedge.

But suddenly the woman sat up a little and the drowsy look on her face began to clear away. A figure of a man had appeared at the white gate and was walking across the field. He walked with a kind of swaggering uncertainty and now and then he stopped and took up a handful of mown grass and dropped it again. He was carrying a scythe on his shoulder.

She watched him intently as he skirted the standing grass and came towards the ash tree. He halted at last within the shade of the tree and took a long look at the expanse of grass, thick with buttercups and tall bull-daisies, scattered everywhere like a white and yellow mass of stars.

'By Christ,' he muttered softly.

His voice was jocular and tipsy. The woman stood up.

'What's the matter, Ponto?' she said.

'This all he's cut?'

'That's all.'

'By Christ.'

He laid his scythe on the grass in disgust. He was a tall, thin, black-haired fellow, about thirty, lean and supple as a stoat; his sharp, dark-brown eyes were filled with a roving expression, half dissolute and half cunning; the light in them was sombre with drinking. His soft red lips were full and pouting, and there was something about his face altogether conceited, easy-going and devilish. He had a curious habit of looking at

things with one eye half closed in a kind of sleepy wink that was marvellously knowing and attractive. He was wearing a dark slouch hat which he had tilted back from his forehead and which gave him an air of being a little wild but sublimely happy.

Suddenly he grinned at the woman and walked over to where the man lay sleeping. He bent down and put his mouth close to his face.

'Hey, your old hoss's bolted!' he shouted.

The man woke with a start.

'Your old hoss's bolted!'

'What's that? Where did you spring from?'

'Get up, y' old sleepy guts. I wanna get this grass knocked down afore dark.'

The man got to his feet.

'Knock this lot down afore dark?'

'Yes, my old beauty. When I mow I do mow, I do.' He smiled and wagged his head. 'Me and my old dad used to mow twenty-acre fields afore dark – and start with the dew on. Twenty-acre fields. You don't know what mowin' is.'

He began to take off his jacket. He was slightly unsteady on his feet and the jacket bothered him as he pulled it off and he swore softly. He was wearing a blue-and-white shirt and a pair of dark moleskin trousers held up by a wide belt of plaited leather thongs. His whetstone rested in a leather socket hanging from the belt. He spat on his hands and slipped the whetstone from the socket and picked up his scythe and with easy, careless rhythmical swings began to whet the long blade. The woman gazed at the stroke of his arm and listened to the sharp ring of the stone against the blade with a look of unconscious admiration and pleasure on her face. The blade of the scythe was

## THE MOWER

very long, tapering and slender, and it shone like silver in the freckles of sunlight coming through the ash leaves. He ceased sharpening the blade and took a swing at a tuft of bull-daisies. The blade cut the stalks crisply and the white flowers fell evenly together, like a fallen nosegay. His swing was beautiful and with the scythe in his hand the balance of his body seemed to become perfect and he himself suddenly sober, dignified, and composed.

'Know what my old dad used to say?' he said.

'No.'

'Drink afore you start.'

'Fetch a bottle of beer for Ponto,' said the man to the boy at once. 'I got plenty of beer. The boy went up on the way and fetched it.'

'That's a good job. You can't mow without beer.'

'That's right.'

'My old man used to drink twenty pints a day. God's truth. Twenty pints a day. He was a bloody champion. You can't mow without beer.'

The woman came up with a bottle of beer in her hand. Ponto took it from her mechanically, hardly looking at her. He uncorked the bottle, covered the white froth with his mouth and drank eagerly, the muscles of his neck rippling like those of a horse. He drank all the beer at one draught and threw the empty bottle into the hedge, scaring the pony.

'Whoa! damn you!' he shouted.

The pony tossed his head and quietened again. Ponto wiped his lips, and taking a step or two towards the boy, aimed the point of the scythe jocularly at his backside. The boy ran off and Ponto grinned tipsily at the woman.

'You goin' to turn the rows?' he said.

'Yes,' she said.

He looked her up and down, from the arch of her hips to the clear shape of the breasts in her blouse and the coil of her black pigtail. Her husband was walking across the field to fetch his scythe. She smiled drowsily at Ponto and he smiled in return.

'I thought you'd come,' she said softly.

His smile broadened and he stretched out his hand and let his fingers run down her bare brown throat. She quivered and breathed quickly and laughed softly in return. His eyes rested on her face with mysterious admiration and delight and he seemed suddenly very pleased about something.

'Good old Anna,' he said softly.

He walked past her and crossed the field to the expanse of unmown grass. He winked solemnly and his fingers ran lightly against her thigh as he passed her.

The woman followed him out into the sunshine and took up her rake and began to turn the rows that had been cut since early morning. When she glanced up again the men were mowing. They seemed to be mowing at the same even, methodical pace, but Ponto was already ahead. He swung his scythe with a long light caressing sweep, smoothly and masterfully, as though his limbs had been born to mow. The grass was shaved off very close to the earth and was laid in a tidy swathe that curved gently behind him like a thick rope. On the backward stroke the grass and the buttercup cups and the bull-daisies were pressed gently up his wards, bent in readiness to meet the forward swing. When he came through the grass with a soft swishing stroke the sound of indrawn breath.

The boy came and raked in the row next to the woman. Together they turned the rows and the

mowed in silence for a long time. Every time the woman looked up she looked at Ponto. He was always ahead of her husband and he moved with a kind of lusty insistence, as though he were intent on moving the whole field before darkness fell. Her husband mowed in a stiff, awkward fashion, always limping and often whetting his scythe. The boy had taken some beer to Ponto, who often stopped to drink. She would catch the flash of the bottle tilted up in the brilliant sunshine and she would look at him meditatively as though remembering something.

As the afternoon went on, Ponto mowed far ahead of her husband, working across the field towards the pond and the willows. He began at last to mow a narrow space of grass behind the pond. She saw the swing of his bare arms through the branches and then lost them again.

Suddenly he appeared and waved a bottle and shouted something.

'I'll go,' she said to the boy.

She dropped her rake and walked over to the ash tree and found a bottle of beer. The flies were tormenting the horse and she broke off an ash bough and slipped it in the bridle. The sun seemed hotter than ever as she crossed the field with the beer, and the earth was cracked and dry under her feet. She picked up a stalk of buttercups and swung it against her skirt. The scent of the freshly-mown grass was strong and sweet in the sunshine. She carried the beer close by her side, in the shadow.

Ponto was mowing a stretch of grass thirty or forty yards wide behind the pond. The grass was richer and taller than in the rest of the field and the single swathes he had cut lay as thick as corn.

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She sat down on the bank of the pond under a willow until he had finished his bout of mowing. She had come up silently, and he was mowing with his back towards her, and it was not until he turned that he knew she was there.

He laid his scythe in the grass and came sidling up to her. His face was drenched in sweat and in his mouth was a stalk of totter-grass and the dark red seeds trembled as he walked. He looked at Anna with a kind of sleepy surprise.

'Good old Anna,' he said.

'You did want beer?' she said.

He smiled and sat down at her side.

She too smiled with a flash of her black eyes. He took the bottle from her hand and put one hand on her knee and caressed it gently. She watched the hand with a smile of strange, wicked, ironical amusement. He put the bottle between his knees and unscrewed the stopper.

'Drink,' he said softly.

She drank and gave him the bottle.

'Haven't seen you for ages,' she murmured.

He shrugged his shoulders and took a long drink. His hand was still on her knee and as she played idly with the stalk of buttercups, her dark face concealed its rising passion in a look of wonderful preoccupation, as though she had forgotten him completely. He wetted his lips with his tongue and ran his hand swiftly and caressingly from her knees to her waist. Her body was stiff for one moment and then it relaxed and sank backwards into the long grass. She shut her eyes and slipped into his embrace like a snake, her face blissfully happy, her hand still clasping the stalk of buttercups, her whole body trembling.



## THE MOWER

Presently across the field came the sound of a scythe being sharpened. She whispered something quickly and struggled and Ponto got to his feet. She sat up and buttoned the neck of her blouse. She was flushed and panting, and her eyes rested on Ponto with a soft, almost beseeching look of adoration.

Ponto walked away to his scythe and picked it up and began mowing again. He mowed smoothly and with a sort of aloof indifference as though nothing had happened, and she let him mow for five or six paces before she too stood up.

'Ponto,' she whispered.

'Eh?'

'I'll come back,' she said.

She remained for a moment in an attitude of expectancy, but he did not speak or cease the swing of his arms, and very slowly she turned away and went back across the field.

She walked back to where she had left her rake. She picked up the rake and began to turn the swathes of hay again, following the boy. She worked for a long time without looking up. When at last she lifted her head and looked over towards the pond, she saw that Ponto had ceased mowing behind the pond and was cutting the grass in the open field again. He was mowing with the same easy, powerful insistence and with the same beautiful swaggering rhythm of his body, as though he could never grow tired.

They worked steadily on and the sun began to swing round behind the ash tree and the heat began to lessen and twilight began to fall. While the two men were mowing side by side on the last strip of grass, the woman began to pack the victual-bags and put the saddle on the horse under the ash tree.

She was strapping the girth of the saddle when she heard feet in the grass and a voice said softly:

'Any more beer?'

She turned and saw Ponto. A bottle of beer was left in the bag and she brought it out for him. He began drinking, and while he was drinking she gazed at him with rapt admiration, as though she had been mysteriously attracted out of herself by the sight of his subtle, conceited, devilish face, the memory of his embrace by the pond and the beautiful untiring motion of his arms swinging the scythe throughout the afternoon. There was something altogether trustful, foolish and abandoned about her, as though she were sublimely eager to do whatever he asked.

'Think you'll finish?' she said in a whisper.

'Easy.'

He corked the beer and they stood looking at each other. He looked at her with a kind of careless, condescending stare, half smiling. She stood perfectly still, her eyes filled with half-happy, half-frightened submissiveness.

He suddenly wiped the beer from his lips with the back of his hand and put out his arm and caught her waist and tried to kiss her.

'Not now,' she said desperately. 'Not now. He'll see. Afterwards. He'll see.'

He gave her a sort of half-pitying smile and shrugged his shoulders and walked away across the field without a word.

'Afterwards,' she called in a whisper.

She went on packing the victual-bags, the expression on her face lost and expectant. The outlines of the field and the figures of the mowers became softer and

darker in the twilight. The evening air was warm and heavy with the scent of the hay.

The men ceased mowing at last. The boy had gone home and the woman led the horse across the field to where the men were waiting. Her husband was tying the sack about the blade of his scythe. She looked at Ponto with a dark, significant flash of her eyes, but he took no notice.

'You'd better finish the beer,' she said.

He took the bottle and drank to the dregs and then hurled the bottle across the field. She tried to catch his eye, but he was already walking away over the field, as though he had never seen her.

She followed him with her husband and the horse. They came to the gate of the field and Ponto was waiting. A look of anticipation and joy shot up in her eyes. 'Why should I damn well walk?' said Ponto. 'Eh? Why should I damn well walk up this lane when I can sit on your old hoss? Lemme get up.'

He laid his scythe in the grass and while the woman held the horse he climbed into the saddle.

'Give us me scythe,' he asked. 'I can carry that. Whoa! mare, damn you!'

She picked up the scythe and gave it to him and he put it over his shoulder. She let her hand touch his knee and fixed her eyes on him with a look of inquiring eagerness, but he suddenly urged the horse forward and began to ride away up the lane.

She followed her husband out of the field. He shut the gate and looked back over the darkening field at the long black swathes of hay lying pale yellow in the dusk. He seemed pleased and he called to Ponto:

'I don't know what the Hanover we should ha' done without you, Ponto.'

## THE MOWER

Ponto waved his rein-hand with sublime conceit.

'That's nothing,' he called back. 'Me and my old dad used to mow forty-acre fields afore dark. God damn it, that's nothing. All in the day's work.'

He seized the rein again and tugged it and the horse broke into a trot, Ponto bumping, the saddle and swearing and shouting as he went up the lane.

The woman followed him with her husband. He walked slowly, limping, and now and then she walked on a few paces ahead, as though trying to catch up with the retreating horse. Sometimes the horse would slow down into a walk and she would come almost to within speaking distance of Ponto, but each time the horse would break into a fresh trot and leave her as far behind again. The lane was dusky with twilight and Ponto burst into a song about a girl and a sailor.

'Hark at him,' said the husband. 'He's a Tartar. He's a Tartar.'

The rollicking voice seemed to echo over the fields with soft, deliberate mocking. The woman did not speak: but as she listened her dark face was filled with the conflicting expression of many emotions, exasperation, perplexity, jealousy, longing, hope, anger.

## THE HESSIAN PRISONER

IT was towards the middle of June, in the year 1917, when Jasper and Clara Bird obeyed for the first time certain instructions written out for them by a little black major presiding over the camp for prisoners of war, and harnessing their white horse and cart, drove off a little before eight o'clock one morning to fetch the German they had hired with so much misgiving in a great extremity.

They often remembered that day. It was especially lovely: the air sultry with a menace of thunder and full of the singing birds as they drove away from the farm; the clear sky was alive with larks, and black-birds and finches and yellow buntings were piping gently about the fields and in the thick trees, which were still sopped with dew. Like bass viols in an orchestra, bees had already begun to enrich and unify those sounds into a single immense harmony, the soft, throbbing concert of perfect summer.

It was hay-time. The sound of a horse-mower or a whetstone upon a scythe would echo across the valley; and even at that early hour of the day freshly-mown swathes were already turning white under the heat of the sun.

War had forced this small tenant-farmer and his wife to a crisis in their affairs; by instinct they feared and hated war, but recently its barbarism had brought calamity upon them. In times of peace and in the early years of war, they had employed two labourers and a boy of sixteen, but suddenly the boy had drifted off to make boots in an adjoining town, and the men

had failed to convince the tribunal; and then the news had come that one was dead and that the other lay stricken by some nameless incurable disease, on strange and distant territory. The hopeless and chaotic inhumanity of war then became suddenly personal; war itself assumed, as it were, a physical shape, and for that shape they gradually conceived a terrible, vindictive hatred. Besides grief there arose the problem of how to replace the men, and they discovered that men were scarcer than gems. Women, dressed foolishly in smocks and breeches, were plentiful enough but they distrusted and despised them. And so for a long time they deliberated, until at last it appeared that nothing remained for them but to act as their neighbours had done; and finally, timidly and suspiciously, they applied for a prisoner of war.

Driving to fetch him for the first time they sat in silence. Their steadfast, honest, taciturn faces seemed uneasy and plunged in gloom. Leaning his arm on the disused umbrella-basket, the man drove in a desultory, almost indifferent fashion, and beside him his wife never moved except to chew a yellow bent or to finger, abstractedly, her dark hair.

Otherwise they looked, that morning, much as usual. The man was without a jacket and his stoat-coloured corduroys were held up by two leather thongs affixed in turn by thin nails for buttons. A panama hat, ripe and ancient even before catastrophe had fallen upon them, flooded his face with a sunny orange; his mouth was concealed by an unclipped yellow moustache bristling like horned wheat; his fair brows straggled down, in tiny curls, before his blue, drowsy eyes. His wife was a neat and compact body, with hair of jet and breasts as small as teacups, and the blouse she wore was

of the same blue and white stuff as Jasper's shirt, cut from a cheap length picked up one day at market. Her crude boots were laced with string, and that morning her white crushable hat had fallen in cow-slime and simply through negligence or haste had not been cleaned again. With the motion of the cart their loose, brown awkward bodies jolted constantly up and down, and their eyes fixed themselves continually upon the distance, as if watching something.

They had many doubts as to the wisdom of hiring this prisoner. Though it constantly troubled them, however, they secretly wondered what he would be like. Deeply sceptical, the man fancied a stout, spectacled, ponderous fellow who, in private life, had perhaps been a doctor or a minister of religion, a person utterly useless to him. Reminiscent of what she had so often seen in the newspapers, Clara always visualized some immense, barbaric Prussian who would terrify their lives and steal and finally escape, leaving them at the mercy of the authorities.

And as they drove up to the gates of the camp they became nervous, foreseeing the worst. Some sentries were pacing their distances under a great avenue of trees. Jasper had to present an official paper, converse a little, and then follow a soldier down the avenue out of sight.

Impassively chewing the grass and regarding the sentry with native curiosity, the woman suddenly let loose her imagination and a host of unbelievable horrors and terrors stormed through her mind, until she felt she already feared and hated the prisoner.

'What with one thing and another, he'll make life miserable for us,' she thought.

In the midst of these meditations Jasper reappeared in the avenue. She looked up suddenly and seeing the prisoner between Jasper and the soldier, thought in a flash:

'He's a terrible great fellow!'

That was all. And before she was aware of it, all formalities were over and she was making room for him in the rear of the cart. Then events came swiftly; the prisoner climbed into the cart, weighing it heavily backward; the sentry retreated; Jasper moved the seat a couple of notches forward for better balance; and suddenly they drove away.

The man, a Hessian, was a young fellow, very tall and even fairer than Jasper, with a physique that had something god-like and splendid about it. Once or twice they heard him moving clumsily behind, and Clara, suspicious and afraid, turned to see that he was not escaping them. But it was simply that he could not adjust his huge proportions to the confined space of the cart.

During that journey they repeatedly spied upon him from the corners of their eyes. All this time his large hands lay loosely on his knees and he constantly surveyed the sky, the distant woodland, and the fresh fertile valley through which they were passing, and something docile, ingenuous, wondering, was always expressed in that stare, and sometimes he appeared to sigh, as if with profound relief.

At last the small white farmstead appeared and the pony slackened its pace.

'Get down and open the gate,' said Jasper almost in an undertone.

Clara stood up; and then a curious thing happened. The springs of the cart gave a sudden heave, and with



an easy cumbrous alacrity, the prisoner jumped down and flung open the gate, and before she could put her foot on the step or could recover from the astonishment, he caught the pony's head and walked beside it until Jasper halted. Then he stood quite still, almost to attention. His large, mobile eyes seemed to reflect perfectly the heaven's blue in the shadow of the stables as he stood, very watchful and very alert, waiting for her to alight. But when Jasper commenced in his customary deliberate way to unharness, the prisoner rapidly unloosed the belly-band, then the bridle and collar, and suddenly, almost as if impatient, seized the harness complete and bore it into the stables. There he stood with a singular air of concentration where each part was hung, nodding frequently in a way almost boyish in its vehemence, so that when Clara came in and dropped the long green cart-cushions on an orange-box, she returned the sudden stare he gave her with confusion, fear and mistrust, already resentful of his presence. Jasper failing also to understand this adroitness and courtesy, never withdrew his eyes from him.

Shortly, in silence, they walked to the house, Jasper leading, after him the prisoner, then Clara. All their movements were provoked by fear and by distrust, so that when Clara dropped a hairpin suspicion and dread forced her to keep watch on him even as she groped for it among the straw.

It was their custom to eat first at half-past five and again at nine, and Clara began to cut pieces of bread and Jasper slices of cold bacon immediately they reached the kitchen, and some dry boughs were found and put under the kettle. All the time the Hessian leaned timidly against the lintel, as boys do at the

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doors of blacksmiths' or bakers' shops, and watched them.

'Come in – eat – sit down!' Jasper suddenly urged; but the Hessian did not move. 'Eat – fodder – bread! Eh? Come – understand? – Sit down, eh?' But there was no answer.

Clara left off cutting and stared, just in time to see Jasper, suddenly inspired, rub his paunch and laugh, and to hear the prisoner's sudden low, 'Ja! Ja!' of delight.

Come? Understand?' bawled Jasper with immense joy, rubbing his belly repeatedly.

'Ja! Ja!'

And wiping his hands over his greyish-blue uniform and looking this way and that, with a little curiosity and mistrust perhaps also, the prisoner slowly crossed the threshold.

It seemed natural to them that he should eat with them. They had no children. If there had been many prisoners it would have been different; in that case a barn would have done; but about one prisoner alone in a barn there seemed something callous and altogether against their principles, and very deep within them also burned a sense of fierce responsibility, of unshakable, stolid honour, the thought that they must never lose sight of him, that they must guard him with the bravest vigilance, that they must see him safely back to the camp each evening. Failure in these things brought consequences unknown, unthinkable and terrible.

They began to eat. Like a child in the presence of strange people the prisoner was awkward and timid and never spoke, but only once made a sound, low and inarticulate, as of gratitude, when a cup was given

him, though Jasper's sudden snap, like a dog's, at a great slice of bacon, a crude sort of encouragement to him to do likewise without delay, brought a smile to his soft mouth and destroyed momentarily his look of astonished vacancy.

Eventually the meal was over. Leading the way into the cowyard, Jasper was dwarfed by the magnificent bulk of the young Hessian, and something about that mere physical incongruity attracted Clara, so that she remained on the doorstep, watching, some moments after hurling the warm tea-leaves among the hens.

Jasper turned into a barn and the Hessian followed him, stooping. A curious piece of comedy began. Jasper shovelled up some dung with grave deliberation; the prisoner watched; then with an emphatic gesture, he flung the dung into the sunshine, and the prisoner nodded; almost delighted at the success of this dumb show, Jasper then made a singularly expressive gesture intended to be authoritative and at the same time knowing and good-natured, and suddenly performing a very ancient trick of his, lowering his right eyebrow and gazing heavenward as if to say, 'None of your tricks with me,' he thrust the shovel into the prisoner's hands, planted himself firmly upon his legs and acted with remote resemblance to a prison-warder. Probably much too excited to note the details of all this, the Hessian began at once shovelling away dung in enormous quantities and with a pleasing competence and gusto. Jasper, plunged into agreeable reflections, stood with some pleasure meditatively scratching his back. Then by a strange coincidence the Hessian also began to scratch, and suddenly they looked at each other, with the result that, amid a great burst of laughter,

the Hessian in frantic haste made a search of his person, and being apparently rewarded made an extremely clever click with his thumb and forefinger and gravely blew the imaginary louse away. Whether this was reality or only the prisoner's foolery, Jasper never knew, but abruptly he went off into uncontrollable and prolonged laughter while the Hessian caught more fleas and disposed of them with the dexterity and callousness of great experience.

Unexpectedly the situation became worse. Jasper's back began to itch in a most alarming way, and in an inaccessible and maddening spot. He began squirming, scratching, dancing and saying: 'Oh, my God! this is too much, I'll swear my oath this one's a monster!' until the Hessian thinking this foolery also, went wild with delight and began punching Jasper in the small of the back, which produced exactly the effect of his punching a rubber squeaky doll, except that Jasper was screaming with laughter at the top of his voice, resembling more than anything the screeching of an enraged goose.

Clara had not heard that laugh for many years; now it seemed to her like some uncanny and fantastic echo of the past. She gave one immense start on hearing it, and then from the kitchen door ran across the cattle-yard as if it were a cry of pain.

At the barn, however, she stood petrified. Jasper and the prisoner looked to be wrestling or fighting. At the same time there was this uproarious, unaccountable, almost unseemly laughter.

'What's the matter with you, you idiots?' she managed to call at last.

'Eh? What?' the laughter lessened a little.

'What's the matter with you?' she cried.

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Her face expressed something so astounded and so incredulous that they again burst into laughter, which was prolonged some minutes, while she, impatiently or mutely, again urged them to explain themselves. At last she was told:

'We both think we're covered in fleas! That's all. You see he can't explain, and neither can I.'

Suddenly she also began laughing, and her laugh caused a shy, soft and almost startled expression to flicker over the face of the prisoner, and from that moment all was different. Fear no longer troubled her, and from the way Jasper looked up at the prisoner, still laughing and occasionally squirming, she could tell that he also had passed out of reach of the same emotion.

'It's all right,' she thought, 'most likely he's glad to be out of it. Perhaps he even knows that he'll be happy here — at any rate we shall feed him, authorities or no authorities, and perhaps in time we shall learn not to worry him quite so much.'

Back in the house these notions increased in their peculiar persuasion, so that her suspicions also lessened, and her mind became sweet and calm.

Then Jasper came in, laughing still, but in a suppressed way, like a hen clucking with pleasure. He belched out, with evident satisfaction too, the words:

'I've left him to himself.'

And in that utterance reposed an essence of something daring, reckless, almost impossible, and as if it had been the utterance of a mischievous infant, Jasper chuckled again.

Before evening, by a repetition of certain acts of courtesy, he had become to the woman the embodiment of grace and trust, and to the man, who

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ruminated constantly upon his competence with tools, beasts and machines, not only a great wit, but a Hercules, a man with a head on his shoulders, indeed the very masterpiece of a man; and though much too cautious ever to commit themselves, they began to look forward to hay-time with his help as an event of fine expectation and great promise.

A few weeks elapsed. During that time the prisoner, whose name was Johann, acquired from the camp and the farm a little English, which led first to a brief exchange of words of the simplest meaning, and then to conversations of a more subtle nature, and gradually to a language which affected in their lives a deep, indescribable harmony.

In their taciturn way they became delighted at his presence on the farm with them. It became shortly nothing but Johann this, Johann that; and when, for reasons obscurely imposed by the authorities, he remained away on Sundays, they missed acutely his huge, ruddy, flaxen-haired figure and the sound of his voice, and the work he habitually did seemed to fall with unbearable heaviness upon them. Johann was a great worker; for trivial or important tasks he was a glutton – adaptable, conscientious, courteous, indefatigable, clever with implements, sagacious concerning crops, full of notions on domestic subjects. He was devoted to animals, calling the cows by name and bestowing upon one heavy-maned chestnut mare all the happy compassion and fidelity of a lover.

During hay-time he had been no less than a miracle. All the heaviest labour, including the building of ricks, he had taken upon himself. His great strength, his astuteness, his quick, inflexible and scientific organization, amazed them.

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They discovered much about him — that he had been severely wounded and would bleed violently from his nose, and that he was young enough to have been their son. All these things drove out the last of suspicion and fear concerning him. They began to regard him as a boy, tireless, genuine, lovable. Then, when it became not unusual for him to remain alone in the fields, they discovered that he could sing. The depth, the richness of his voice, stirred them deeply; and he sang repeatedly melodies of his boyhood, of the time when (they thought) he must have known country surroundings — quiet happiness, a lover, and the old, irresponsible days of peace; and his voice would recreate for him the essence of that felicitous, wonderful, incomparable time.

When hay-time had passed there arrived that time of lingering, of expectation, of the promise of harvest, resembling the last months of a pregnancy.

It was the custom, on hot days, to sit out for meals under the large walnut tree spreading to the south of the farmhouse. Propped up against the bole, the Birds ate their dinner of bread, meat and cheese, with beer, in a matter-of-fact, contented way. Sometimes when stirred to an unusual degree of indignation by fresh and more terrible news of fighting, Jasper would launch forth on a discussion on war, hotly maintaining that all sides were mad, callous, inhuman, declaring that only the innocent suffered, pointing out the monstrous folly of that state which could spend millions on saving its people from smallpox, cancer, tuberculosis, pneumonia, merely that they might be thrown, like worthless scraps, into the belly of war.

Johann used to squat with an ash-stave between his knees, feeling and smoothing it and uttering approving

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murmurs. These moments of unexpected indignation – of futile rage against the inevitable – found an eager response in him. Much of the argument would escape him; as to the rest, he could only passionately agree, and each argument and display of indignation brought him closer to the Birds.

On one of these occasions he brought out a photograph to show them. It showed a kind-eyed, middle-aged and rather handsome German woman, dressed all in black except for a white kerchief over her head. When he began explaining, rapidly, piteously, almost unintelligibly, that this was his mother, tears started quickly to Clara's eyes and Jasper fell to biting his lips. And when he suddenly declared in broken language how like the affection of motherhood her own affection seemed, she ran away and wept bitterly.

'That's the most we could have done for him, poor child. His mother would know that.'

From that moment she went about with a sense of elation. Having no children, nothing in her life, she felt, had touched her so tenderly or happily as this comparison, this devoted trust in her; and whenever Johann called 'Clara!' across the yard or the fields, a little blood reddened her cheeks, the blood of a woman embarrassed or delighted, the blood of an awakened affection.

Harvest came. Over the bleached ripe fields seemed to float small mauve and scarlet fleets of scabious and poppies, and the heat came in stifling waves across the corn.

Once again his boisterous, never-sleeping strength, his exuberance, his unselfishness, made them ask themselves:



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‘What should we have done without him?’

It was late September before they erected the last stack. When they brought up the last wagon and began filling in the roof it was evening, growing cool, and the horses were restless. Johann was in a careless mood and was laughing and singing as he took up the sheaves.

Suddenly, in the midst of all this, the horses jerked on and a wagon-wheel scraped against the ladder on which Johann was standing. Almost at once the ladder toppled and slid slowly across the smooth straw, and in a second or two, almost before the terrible ‘Johann! Johann!’ had sprung from their lips, the prisoner was flung over the terrified horses’ heads and thrown violently to earth.

‘Johann! Johann!’ they continued to call against each other in terror. ‘Good God! Oh, good God!’

In terror they became helpless and pathetic. It was inconceivably hard for them to climb out of the wagon, to run and to watch that prostrate figure, and to endure the agonies of uncertainty. Again they were like children. They were numb. But the sight of the Hessian crawling slowly to his feet filled them with a strange boundless, almost intoxicating joy, and they began without hesitation to fuss about him with little cries, with desperation, with hands trembling with anxiety to touch, to soothe, to set at rest the last doubts.

Meanwhile the prisoner was violently shaking his head and repeating, ‘Nein, nein, nein,’ with great excitement.

‘What? Not hurt? Nowhere?’

‘Nein! Nein! Noding, noding!’

And though still in terror, they ran their hands over

his great limbs, much as men do when they buy a prime beast.

Further consternation followed, for Jasper in a sudden rage strode up to the horses and struck them, first with his fist, and then harder, with his knees, in their bellies, until the prisoner, as if strangely upset by this attack, fainted. That was the last straw. Disaster, fear of death, had paralysed them. Johann's fainting fit set them running, like two clockwork dolls, into all conceivable holes and corners, wherever by chance fate might have left remedies. Then, having revived him, they searched him for wounds and bruises, only to find that, apart from one bluish mark, there was nothing; he was unblemished.

Some weeks elapsed. Harvest was over; a little yellow sprinkled the elms. Jasper and the prisoner found amusement in splashing walnuts, but though the Hessian was extremely active, at moments he appeared to wince, as if suffering some acute stab of pain. Apart from this the days were tranquil, ineffably at peace, and transcended, like those of a woman delivered at last, and there spread over the farm great broodings and quietnesses broken only by occasional visits of commissioners of food and supplies who bullied and shouted patriotic nonsense, or by the halting of a battalion not far off, and its men coming in for water and lingering about the well, talking and smoking.

But, whatever happened, the affection and harmony which united them did not change except to increase and to bind them closer.

It was towards November that the prisoner began to cause them uneasiness. He became less active, and moved laboriously, as if his legs were weighted, and the tasks he had once performed like a Samson, bois-

terously and with singing, suddenly seemed to intimidate him.

What was wrong with him? They speculated, argued, questioned him. Secretly proud of his strength, however, he would divulge nothing. One morning his nose bled violently, and they began to fear that some complication might arise from his wound and the fall, and they urged him to report himself to the prisoners' doctor.

'Ach!' - and that was enough to convey how disgusting that idea was to him.

His appearance presented at first no change. At times he even recaptured his boisterousness and again worked with the old, miraculous strength. But many relapses occurred, and by the end of November his face had become like that of an anaemic woman.

They saw a strange drooping about his shoulders. They began to reason with him; he was adamant, would not listen, and half-swaggeringly drew off his shirt and invited them to examine his clear brown flesh, and when they could discover no blemish, turned on them with a sort of angry pity:

'Ach, you thought dere was something but there is nothing, hein?'

They were repelled by this attitude, and preserved silence until one afternoon of cold rain, winds and storms of yellow and rusty leaves, when they were sacking potatoes in the barn. The sacks were filled by Jasper and Clara and, though it was against their wishes, Johann built them in a mound against the wall. As the mound grew, sweat poured down his face, and he struggled in a way which hurt them. But he would hear nothing, though their reproofs were gentle, and the strength of his resolution and resistance grew like

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some half-fanatical religion, filling his eyes with a consuming light.

Nevertheless, striving to heave a full sack above his head some moments later, the strength in him, as if cut off as suddenly and effectually as an electric current, failed utterly. The sack dropped like a stone. Potatoes were disgorged bouncing in all directions. He remained immovable, dumb, stupid, as if regarding them as so many comic balls dancing about his feet.

'Johann! Johann!' they cried. They too stared at the potatoes. They began to stammer reproaches.

'You should have reported as we told you, directly you felt anything after that fall! Look what a way you fell. Oh, why didn't you go? . . . and now! — You see, it's perhaps inside you — here! And the wound! — God alive, how you can keep on? Why didn't you go? Why didn't you go a month back?' and so on, despairing or reasoning, until the woman launched at him a different cry.

'Your mother would want you to go!'

At those words he gave a violent start, and tears of hatred and remorse sprang into his eyes, and when he tried to answer their reproaches he failed miserably, which made him even more inexorable, more fanatical in the notion of carrying out his will. He stood in the midst of the scattered potatoes resembling an animal that has wounded itself but will die rather than suffer hands laid upon it, and nothing would induce him to surrender that defiant attitude.

Thus they passed through a period of mystification and trial, torn between tenderness, anger and despair at the sight of him wasting and suffering before their eyes. Their distress was piteous. They became

practical, insistent upon his accepting their aid, their ointments from herbs, their poultices and country decoctions. They administered with great faith. They cherished tenderly and jealously the dream of his being cured by their devoted skill and solicitude.

They had great hope in him. The work he did, however, was negligible, and it became difficult for him to carry a faggot or take a bucket to the well. Sometimes they caught him with his head buried in his hands or standing pale and still, with a vacant expression, like a ghost, in the first attitudes of voluntary subjection and despair.

And then, late one afternoon, Clara came crying across the farmyard for Jasper. He was chopping wood in the orchard. She halted some yards from him, called his name and began stamping her feet and wringing her hands in terror.

'My God, what is it?' he shouted.

'It's Johann! It's Johann!'

He dropped his axe and, following her, kept asking: 'What is it? What's the boy done?'

'Oh! I don't know. He's fallen . . . he just lies there.'

When they reached him he was lying upon his side, in the twilit stable, beneath the belly of a horse he had been grooming, the horse-comb was clenched in his hand; the horse stood motionless. As they dragged him away and propped him against some sacks of corn he gave a groan. He was revolting to see; he had been bleeding heavily from the nose, and to Jasper he seemed already moribund; his eyes bore a strange, glassy look as if he had been crying when he fell. He lay still; nor did he reply to their entreaties:

'Johann, Johann, what happened? How did you come

to fall? My boy, what's the matter? Tell us, what's the matter? Tell us what it is; tell us, my boy?"

But he was silent; and then, before they had summoned courage or thought, and while the woman was still too curious and frightened for grief and the man too shocked to act, he began a brief stirring and there was a rustling in his throat, as if he wished to speak to them; and when this had ceased, leaving, as it were, its echo in a prolonged and agonizing sigh, his face seemed suddenly softened and chastened and his head fell softly back upon the corn-sacks, and he died.

Hopelessness and panic seized them. They tried to lift him and take him away, and their bungling movements seemed to scare the horses who, smelling death, began stamping restlessly in their stalls. Darkness was falling rapidly, making the young prisoner's face ghostly, and lighting a stable lantern they set it beside the corpse, which their last efforts had given a strange dignity, and stared at each other with sad eyes.

And then the thought entered their minds:

"We're responsible for him — shouldn't we send a message or else take him back to the camp again?"

Except themselves they had no one by whom to send a message, and suddenly their old fear of regulations, soldiers and authorities returned with overwhelming force, and they began to harness the horse in order to take him away.

"Take the feet," said Jasper.

"Oh! I can't lift him. What shall we do?"

"Try, woman, try. Again."

"Oh! dear Lord, I can't do it."

They struggled, but beside him they seemed old and

feeble, and in dying he seemed to have become a giant. And then, as if this were not enough, Jasper knocked over the lantern, and in terror they dropped the body and groped and ran against each other, the woman crying and the man swearing violently.

Finally it was done, and they prepared to drive off. Objects in the darkness, familiar little sounds and obscure movements caused them to recall his life with them.

The cart lurched into the high-road. It was dark. They drove slowly, not speaking. On either side rose the gaunt skeletons of trees, and on the road their feeble, shaded cart-lamps threw two tiny gleams, which ran steadily, everlastingly on beside the horse. Suddenly, without warning, it seemed bitterly cold, with a smell of autumnal decay.

As they began to drive downhill into the valley it seemed that they were descending into a black pit of great depth, and at that point, with the increased jolting of the cart, the prisoner's head began to beat like a dull mallet against the woodwork of the cart.

As if unable to bear that sound, Clara stooped at once, half-knelt and then took the head in her hands and for what seemed unending moments held it without moving. At last, without deliberating and impelled by some obscure desire, she planted softly between his eyes a brief kiss, and there crept into her grief at once a sense of peace, of elation, a feeling of nobility, a sensation of jealousy resembling that of a mother. And all along the road she remained holding the head, at times with all the fierce instincts of her womanhood, at times with tenderness, as if he knew of her touch on him, and sometimes for long periods without a move-

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ment, without a thought, listening mechanically to the sound of wheels and hoofs, the dry cracking of Jasper's whip, and of her own weeping, the low sound of which broke from her with great sorrow, and expanding infinitely, seemed to fill the increasing darkness.



## DEATH IN SPRING

WE had walked up the wood for the second time to look at the young foxes. It was lovely April weather, windless and sunny in the wood under the leafless oak trees and the slender black ashlings. The old hazels were yellow with catkins and the primroses made drifts of yellow distances wherever we turned to look; the bluebells were darkly budded and the first purple orchids had unfolded and the first oxlips. The riding ran through the wood from east to west, smooth and green and wide enough for ten horses to canter abreast; it was flooded with sunlight and out of the shelter of the trees we could feel the west wind very soft on our faces, blowing straight from the corner of the wood where the foxes were.

At the end of the riding we stood still and listened. We had walked up slowly and quietly, without speaking. To the right of us stood an old shooting-hut built of straw and hurdles, and on the left was a long mound of earth burrowed with fox-holes, and bare except for young nettles and a clump or two of elder. On the far side of the mound was a pond, the trees growing down to the edge of it, making the water black with the motionless reflections of their thick trunks and branches. A day or two before I had come upon ten or twelve fox-cubs playing in and out of the bushes of elder. An east wind had been blowing and they had not scented me. They were pretty, amusing, impish things, a little lighter in colour than earth, their soft hair ruffled in the wind like the feathers of birds. Sometimes they trotted down to the edge of the

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pool and looked at the water and sometimes they roamed off into the wood itself, through the dark green stretches of dog's-mercury to where the tide of primroses began. Wherever they went they moved quite soundlessly, with a fine, fox-like assurance and a grace of movement more beautiful than in all other young woodland creatures.

A rabbit scuttled away noisily among the dead wood and undergrowth as we came to a standstill. I stooped and looked between the undergrowth at the fox-burrows: the wind was blowing our scent towards them and the mound was deserted. Irene moved her feet and cracked an ash-twigg and a young rabbit made off wildly from under a tangle of old honeysuckle wood. I looked at her quickly and she smiled. She had never yet seen a fox-cub or even an old fox; she had gathered anemones, as we had come up through the wood, and her hands were full of them and she had put a dark violet in her mouth. She smiled with her lips closed, sucking the sweetness of the violet-stem at the same time. The air was elusively fragrant with the scent of the flowers she was holding and of the thousands of primroses lying everywhere like pools of yellow and green.

I moved cautiously forward for a pace or two until I was level with the shooting-hut. A young fox came suddenly up from a burrow and gazed at me as though puzzled, head sideways and ears cocked, and another trotted noiselessly over the brow of the mound towards the pool.

Irene came up behind me and I pointed out the cub, drawing down her head so that her line of sight should be level with mine. Her hair brushed my cheek. We stood motionless and the fox was motionless too, his

eyes impish and bright and filled with a wise mistrust of us. He watched us for a minute and then without haste turned tail and vanished down the burrow again.

'You saw him?' I whispered.

She nodded.

'You see they are timid,' I said. 'If we could skirt the wood and come up on the far side of the pond we should see them better.'

'Shall we go then?' she whispered.

There was a gate at the end of the riding, and we had only to climb it and walk across a piece of pasture land and skirt a corner of the wood. I was moving towards the gate when suddenly I heard a faint cough and a second later a voice saying:

'I should hardly do that if I were you. You were quite right. They are very timid today.'

We turned at once and looked towards the shooting-hut. The voice was very quiet and dignified, and had about it also something tremulous and faded, as though it belonged to someone very old. We stood still for one moment. I could see nothing and suddenly the voice spoke again.

'Come in, won't you? There's plenty of room. I shan't eat you.'

We walked towards the shooting-hut, glancing at each other rapidly every second or two, until we stood in the doorway. The sunlight made an angle of light across the dry earth floor, and beyond the sunlight — on a rough seat of split hazel sticks running along the back of the hut — an old man was sitting, with a double-barrel sporting gun across his knees. It was difficult to believe that he had ever spoken to us. He seemed at once voiceless and spiritless. He looked incredibly old and he sat as immobile as a mountain,

the skin of his long, sunken face the colour of a dead corn-husk and more transparent, so that the veins shone softly through it like a fragile network of lavender threads, so faint in colour that the dead shining yellowness of the flesh itself was hardly broken. He was dressed in an old pepper-and-salt sporting jacket with breeches to match and coarse green stockings that hung loosely on his thin legs, like moss on an old stick; he looked as if he had long ago lost even the strength to dress himself; his knee-buttons were half undone and his jacket hung open, showing underneath it a waistcoat of faded canary-yellow with the ends of a thick green silk neckerchief drooping across it and tucked away into the armpits. His hat was an old square grey bowler; he wore it at a slight angle towards his right ear, showing a wisp, like a mere silver petal, of his thin hair. The jaunty poise of the hat and the eyes looking at us from underneath it were both symbols of life. The eyes were wonderful. His body was like an aged tree, and his eyes were like two miraculous young leaves. They looked at us as we came to the door of the hut with a vivid expression almost naive in its intense brightness; they did not move, except to lift themselves the finest fraction in order to watch our faces; the light falling upon them redoubled their life, illuminating their colour until it shone like melting ice, infinitely blue and more beautifully vivid; they were like the eyes of a child or of a young girl, full of unquenchable life and curiosity and wonder.

He looked at us in silence for perhaps ten seconds or more; it seemed a long time; and then he made a slight gesture with one hand, lifting two or three fingers from the stock of his gun.

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'Come inside, come inside,' he repeated.

His voice and his simple gesture of the upraised fingers were full of a profound courtesy. We walked into the hut. His eyes rested on us steadily and attentively, and then he moved a fraction along the seat. We had been his guests from the moment of entering.

'Sit down, won't you? Sit down. You can look straight across at the foxes from here — good view of 'em,' he went on. 'Sit one on each side of me. That's right, that's right,' he murmured. 'It's a clear view if they come. But I doubt if they will — I doubt it. Wrong wind. They're getting older too.'

He spoke very slowly, pausing between the phrases, his wet, strengthless red lips quivering in the act of finding his words. He stared into the wood while talking; the sunshine as it fell through the half-leaved branches was broken up into endless flakes of quivering yellow light; he seemed to be watching their inexhaustible dance on the dark earth covered with flowers and bright-green flower-leaves. He was not lost however, and he never forgot that we were there; the extreme courtesy of his voice made us feel that there was nothing in all the world he would rather do than sit and talk to us.

Suddenly he ceased gazing into the wood and turned to Irene and remarked, reflecting:

'Anemones and foxes,' repeating the words two or three times. 'Anemones and foxes, anemones and foxes.' Finally he put out his hand towards the anemones and said: 'Excuse me; may I take one?'

His hand faltered weakly among the bunch and a few anemones were loosened and some fell to the ground. I bent down at once but he was already stooping and saying, 'I insist, I insist.' His body was as

dry and stiff as old leather. He picked up the anemones one by one, breathing with little distressful gasps and bending as though his joints had been locked together. At last he straightened himself with the anemones quivering in his fingers. His face was colourless and his eyes were moist with tears of exhaustion, which began to creep down his cheeks like drops of thin oil. His breath was dry and dead and he sat for a long time with his hands resting heavily on the gun across his knees, with the bluish, sagging lids of his eyes closed, his whole frame struggling to be calm again.

Finally he opened his eyes and made a gesture of beautiful, tired courtesy towards Irene and said;

‘You must forgive me.’

She smiled. He smiled also, and then as though it were simply the natural excuse for his clumsiness he said quietly:

‘I’m afraid I’m dying. Damn it.’

He spoke as though he bitterly hated the thought of dying and there was a kind of defiant life in his words. I did not look at him. I sat looking instead at the gun lying across his knees; it resembled him – old, worn, polished, aristocratic, and I wondered why he had brought it up there, out of season, with the wood full of mating birds and animals and their young.

He saw me looking at the gun. He glanced at me for a second and his bright eyes seemed to take in all my thoughts.

‘You are wondering what makes me carry a gun in spring,’ he said. He looked slightly ashamed of himself, as though he were a boy and we suspected him of hiding eggs in his cap.

‘I wanted a shot,’ he confessed. ‘I’ve been a sportsman all my life. You know how it is – something

you've always done – can't leave it alone. I had to come up. I've been in bed for a God-forsaken month. I had a room overlooking the orchard and they let me sit up in bed and shoot sparrows through the open window with an air-gun. I used to wait until they settled on the plum-bloom. Kill about a bird a day if I was lucky. I got bored to death. I like the open country and something worth shooting, like snipe, you understand.' He turned his head and looked at us in turn. There was a gay light in his eyes – that light which always comes into the eyes of old men when they talk to children. 'I dare say you think it's wrong to shoot?' he asked. 'What's wrong in it? All sentimentality – nonsense, a great deal of nonsense. It's only a law – the strong preying on the weak. Yes, it's nonsense – a lot of talk by people who probably wouldn't know a tit from a hawk, and who wouldn't care if they did. Life won't stop because I shoot a pigeon.'

He broke off, a little exhausted by talking, and leaned back his head against the wall of the hut and let his gaze rest again on the bright-green wood and the flakes of trembling sunlight. It was warm and sheltered in the hut, and the breeze came in at the doorway full of the sweetness of the wood breaking into life again.

There was a silence. I looked over towards the fox-holes; the mound was still deserted. I heard a sigh. And suddenly, out of his meditation, the old man was saying:

'When I look at this wood I have immortal longings in me.'

A moment later he went on, muttering to himself, as though he had forgotten we were there:

'The stroke of death is as a lover's pinch which hurts and is desired.'

## DEATH IN SPRING

He broke off and lifted his hand from the stock of his gun and said with a tremor of excitement in his voice:

'I used to know it all. A long time ago – sixty years ago. A young girl I knew was Cleopatra. I didn't act, but I knew the part. I used to shut myself up and learn it.'

A young fox suddenly trotted over the mound, sniffing among the elder bushes, and I watched him until he disappeared by the pool. The old man went on talking again, telling us of the girl who had taken the part of Cleopatra. He talked of her gently and meditatively, half to himself, sometimes quite absently, and then a little shyly when he recalled suddenly that we were there. She had been a dark, brilliant, capricious creature, with all the eager, passionate, irresponsible gaiety of a young girl just opening her eyes to life. He talked of her for a long time, breaking off, forgetting, meditating – his voice by turns dreamy and tremulous with the effort of remembrance; sometimes he repeated a line or two of a speech, and sometimes he moved his hands and tried to describe to us how beautifully she had acted. There were things he remembered perfectly, such as a yellow silk dress she had worn, a certain way in which she would stand and click her fingers when angry or perplexed; a winter afternoon when he had stood on his head in the snow again and again, just in order to amuse her. He had forgotten how long the play had run, but at the end of it they had run away to the Continent together. There had been days of sweet, hectic happiness. He spoke of her always as Cleopatra, as though too shy to mention her name, and he went on for a long time unfolding his tale, losing



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the thread and picking it up again uncertainly, until it was like some old picture, sewn in silk, of another century.

His voice trailed off at last; he traced over the pattern of the gun-breach with his long, bony forefinger. The girl was dead; he did not want to talk of her again. We sat silent, listening to the silence of the wood broken now and then by the crack of a twig, a black-bird singing, the soft, halting coo of a pigeon – almost a summer sound.

The old man sat sunk in meditation, his chin dropping towards the anemone he had threaded in his buttonhole. He suddenly looked older than ever, an immemorial figure, overburdened by the weight of a thousand years, the wrinkles of his face eternal. Suddenly he turned and looked at me wonderfully, his blue eyes alert and twinkling, as though his whole being had come to life in them.

‘You find it difficult to believe I was once a young man?’ he said.

I had been trying to make myself believe. Before I could answer he said:

‘An old man looks permanent – inevitable – as though he had been born an old man, isn’t that it?’

‘I think that’s it.’

‘Are you glad you are not old?’

‘Yes.’

‘You’d like to remain young? No? You want to go on growing, but whatever happened you want to keep life, don’t you? I know, I know. One of these days I shall snap in half like a damn twig, but I still want life. I’d like time for another shot or two. I want to hang on a bit longer – a bit longer. It’s nice to think of summer coming on. I see the oaks are breaking bud.

## DEATH IN SPRING

I've great faith in that. But I haven't heard the cuckoo yet, have you? It seems late this year.'

He went on talking again, talking of the past, his youth, his shooting days – a time when he had shot a hundred snipe; he had been a gay bird; he had lived joyously and he wanted to go on living; he knew that he was dying and he hated the thought of death. He made long pauses and rested and breathed carefully as he spoke, as though trying to sustain the life in him a little longer. A young fox came over the mound and trotted away in the shadow and sunlight under the trees; he saw it and pointed it out with his thin white forefinger, and we watched it vanish by the pool.

'I should like as many more years to live as foxes I've helped to kill,' he said. 'You're young. I envy you.'

He talked a little longer; he seemed to grow tired and presently we rose to go. He rose also. He stood amazingly straight and tall, only bending his head a little, like a great hollyhock. He shook hands, holding our hands in his bone-cold fingers for a long time.

'It has been a great pleasure,' he said.

'It has been charming,' I said. 'I hope you will get a shot.'

'Thank you. I shall probably miss in any case.'

We said goodbye.

'Goodbye.' He gave us a slight bow, leaning on his gun. He smiled at Irene with his wonderful entrancingly bright eyes, full of gallantry and life. Finally, just as we were going, he said:

'I hope you don't mind if I say something to you – a little advice. If you wish to do anything, do it. Do what you feel you must do. Don't listen to other people. You're young. Let them go to the devil. It's your life, not theirs. If I listened to other people I

shouldn't be up here this afternoon. I should be in bed. Goodbye.'

He took off his hat; his thin, silver-yellow hair shone beautifully; he came to the doorway of the hut to watch us depart. We walked down the riding, and once we turned and saw him still standing there, still hatless, but when we turned a second time he had vanished into the hut again. We said a few words about him, and I thought again of his intense blue eyes, his perfect courtesy, the story of the girl who had been Cleopatra, the way he had learned her lines by heart, and the way he still longed for summer to come. I thought of him lying in bed and shooting sparrows through the open window, and of how he could not bear to lie there and had dragged himself up into the wood for another shot before he died.

We struck away from the riding and walked diagonally through the wood along a narrow path. We came upon the shell of a sucked blackbird's egg, and Irene picked it up and walked with it in her hand, admiring its colours.

There was suddenly the report of a shot in the wood. We stopped. The shot went racing through the trees and rattled the air. A blackbird screamed, and we heard the rabbits scuttling away to hiding, rustling the dry leaves. The shot spent itself at last and the wood was calm with a silence that was like death.

We listened for the sound of the second barrel, but it never came. We walked on again and came out of the wood, and crossing a field of young wheat we heard the cuckoo calling for the first time that spring.

I wondered if the old man had heard it too and how often he would hear it again.



## S H E E P

ONE silent winter afternoon, in an outlying turnip-field sheltered on one side by a copse of young white birches, a small shock-headed boy sat crouching under the stuffed-straw hurdles of a sheep-pen, burying his hands in his breast against the cold. He was alone except for an old grey and blue sheep dog curled up at his side into a mere bundle of shaggy hair, and a flock of sixty or seventy sheep, huddled together under the north side of the pen, where they stood feeding methodically off some turnips he had unpitted and scattered among them. Their breath rose and hovered over them in a thin, cold cloud. A delicate fall of snow had sprinkled their backs, so that they seemed hardly to belong to earth, but looked ineffably pure and white, contrasting strangely with the dark grey sky spreading low overhead, threatening and sombre.

The boy had nothing to do but watch the sheep, and think. The shepherd had gone off to the farm, behind the birch copse, over the hillside.

The loneliness, however, did not oppress him. It was only the cold he hated. The frost seemed to bite into his bones, under his finger-nails, into his jaws and ears and under his hair and into the joints of his body, and at times it pierced to his teeth and through his wide grey eyes, until he felt the saltiness start from them.

Occasionally he had to jump to his feet and stamp on the iron earth and beat his breast or sport with the dog. Then they would crouch under the hurdle again, with the boy gazing into the beast's dark, fond eyes and

whispering, 'Caesar, Caesar!' and gradually lowering his face to the dog's, to be licked at last by its warm tongue.

He was deeply fond of the dog. It was so old and understanding and sagacious. He knew it was also a special favourite of his master's, a giant-limbed, violent-tempered brute of a man, and for that reason he was always watchful and careful of it, never letting it stray from sight.

A long time seemed to pass, the birch trees scarcely trembled and the ominous winter silence seemed deeper. And then it struck the boy that the sheep seemed restless. He thought the shepherd must be returning and stood up and looked towards the birch copse. But no one was coming, not a branch had moved, and thinking it seemed more bitterly cold than ever, he sat down again and wrapped his overcoat about his head until he could see nothing but a grey chink of sky.

All at once the sheep-dog leapt to its feet. Alarmed and wondering, the boy sprang up also. The dog, with its nostrils trembling, stood tense and listening, looking at the sheep.

'What is it?' the boy whispered. 'Caesar, what is it?'

The sheep-dog started a low barking, and the boy observed that the sheep had ceased eating, and that a few had scattered lumbering away from the hurdles, bleating and jostling each other.

He took his stick and advanced towards them, curious and puzzled, trying meanwhile to quieten the dog's suspicious and angry noises. But the dog was too excited, and barked on.

The sheep showed signs of agitation. In twos and threes they were loping stiffly away from the hurdles.

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Each animal kept up the same mournful, protesting bleat. Suddenly they scuffled madly, their scurrying feet hammering on the frozen earth with distress, leaving a clear space scattered with white fragments of half-eaten turnips. A black shape showed itself through a gap in the hurdles a second later.

It shook itself and stood upright. The flock scattered, wild and afraid. The boy saw an enormous and formidable dog, something like a hound, regarding him with a sort of disdainful ferocity, its black flanks heaving rapidly, its long red tongue hanging quivering from its great, angular, upraised head. There was something fearful and sinister about its intense motionlessness, as if it were about to spring, and the boy felt faintly afraid. The dog at his side had ceased barking and stood with its eyes immovably fixed on the strange dog, its body excited and quivering.

The black hound presently lowered its head, and, as if ignoring them both, sniffed the earth in sweeping circles. It then began to move forward, with a sort of cunning indifference, without raising its head, to where the sheep were huddled in a foolish, bleating crowd.

Almost a minute passed. The hound moved a little each second, sniffing the snow till it rose in delicate white powder, while the boy remained as if transfixed, not daring to stir.

Presently the sheep-dog began a low guttural growl. At once the hound shot up its head and glared, erect and vicious, growing more antagonistic as the growling became fiercer. His teeth began to gleam from beneath his black, sneering upper lip. His eyes filled with little curious crystal fires. But he never moved. Similarly there was no stir from the sheep-dog, and the two seemed to wait for each other.

The boy waited too. Half a minute later he was shaken from his immobility by the two dogs springing simultaneously forward at each other, screaming and yelping. The first contact flung the sheep-dog violently into the air. He fell sprawling on his back in the snow, kicking and howling with wild cries. He was not nimble in recovering his feet, and while he still struggled the hound leapt at his throat, amazing in its swift savagery. The sheep-dog uttered a scream, threw off the hound with a tremendous effort, stood erect again and suddenly sprang completely over the other's great black head. He landed perfectly, and while the hound stood baffled flung himself at his hind-quarters, swivelling him about like a toy. In return, with a great snarl of astonished fury, the black dog arched himself for one second into an immense bow, seemed to stiffen and then shot into air, hovering and quivering like flexible steel. Then he descended. The sheep-dog was stunned and smothered, and could not resist the hound tearing at the soft skin of his throat with a wild lust, as if he had gone mad. Only after scratching at the hound's soft snout and eyes could he manage to roll over. There was blood on the light hair under his throat. He shook himself, gaining time by rapid cunning feints at the hound's fore-feet, while the black dog howled and prepared to attack again. At last they fell on each other with terrible fury, rolling over and over in the snow, ripping blood from each other, more and more appalling each moment in their naked passion and primitive madness.

The boy stood as if petrified. Now and then the dogs came hurling together until they almost touched his feet. Occasionally he lashed the air with his stick. When he saw blood on his dog's white throat he opened



his lips and shouted wildly with unintelligible horror.

The sheep in their terror ceased bleating and huddled themselves afar off, silently, like children. The boy in a sort of panic began to think it would never end.

He observed, however, that the sheep-dog's resistance grew gradually more desperate, and that at times, pitifully old and weak, he allowed himself to be outwitted without a murmur. There was a distressful weariness about him. At last the hound flung him against the hurdles and buried his teeth in his scarred throat until the blood came teeming and reddened the froth on his jaws.

'Caesar! Caesar!' the boy began to shout. 'Caesar!'

In obedience the dog made supreme efforts, scratching with strange power, until the hound relaxed. There was a brief respite, but when the sheep-dog struggled up, with his blood staining the snow, and the dogs stood for a moment regarding each other, he looked piteous and exhausted while the hound with its great head flaunted upwards looked magnificent and terrible.

Suddenly the hound made a spring, striking the sheep-dog in the flank, and by the force of the blow rolled him over and over until he stretched against the hurdle again, defenceless and unresisting except for a feeble snapping of his jaws and a weak (as if playful) parrying and clawing with his feet.

'Caesar!' the boy urged. 'Up, Caesar! up! up! Caesar, Caesar!'

The hound however buried his jaws again, the blood spouted once more and the eyes of the old dog, already bloodshot and glassy, gradually enlarged with a hopeless terror, and their remaining light seemed slowly

to contract, flicker feebly and retreat until at last it perished, and the head drooped, as if severed, without a sound.

As though unconscious of this, the hound did not release the sheep-dog's throat until the boy, possessed with sudden courage, began to shout again. Then he looked at the boy with a kind of triumphant malice, after which he made off with long, drooping strides, scattering the sheep again as he clambered over the hurdles.

A strange numbness immediately possessed the boy. Not daring to move, he could only gaze from the dog to the stream of blood winding into powdery snow, and back again to the dog, and then to the blood again, backwards and forwards, until the blood began to darken and freeze.

A horrible sickness came over him, and simultaneously the thought that he must run and tell what had happened. Running towards the birch copse he remembered the dog's master and hesitated. It was growing twilight. A little snow had begun to float down, no larger than bird-seed. He went on, gradually more afraid of his own thoughts, past the birch copse. There was a little fretting sound among the slender young trees, and their dark catkins had begun to quiver.

Someone was coming up the hill, a bearded man, with a long coat and a stick in his hand. He called out to demand as he saw the boy:

'What the devil? What's wrong? Why ain't you over along o' the sheep?'

The boy did not move. He only whispered: 'Summat's been an' killed the dog. I was coming to tell.'

'Summat?' he repeated angrily. 'What do you mean? Killed him? What's happened? The dog?'

'Yes, the dog. Caesar,' the boy said, looking afraid. 'There's been another dog after sheep-worrying, a big black 'un, and Caesar went for him. They had a set-to. But Caesar was no good, not from the first. He bit his throat out. He hadn't a chance.'

'And you let him? My God! And you let him?'

'What could I do? They were mad as mad. I couldn't! I daren't! Go and tell him, you go and tell him.'

'Yes. It's a nice thing to tell, ain't it?' he sneered, but the boy persisted, driven by fear:

'Yes, but you go and tell, you go and tell. He'd smash me.'

The man stood asking more questions, very unwilling. But presently, with repeated curses, he began slowly to retrace his steps. The snowflakes, as large now and as hard as grains of wheat, beat his face as he ran, in haste to relate what had happened. But soon he fell into a walk, then ran, and then walked again. And gradually he, too, began to reason that it would not be pleasant to face the sheep-dog's master, and that it would not be easy to convince that brutal, violent-tempered man of the dog's death. The snow began to fall on the frozen hedges like hail. What would he say? How would he explain it? How would he resist that inevitable passionate fury? He could only find one answer:

'He'll smash me. My God! He'll smash me, he'll rip me to pieces.'



## THE RUSSIAN DANCER

**R**AIN was shooting in cold streaks up the railway lines from the south-west. It beat in lashing gusts under the glass roofs of the platforms and tortured the steam of passing engines to fantastic shreds. Occasionally it drove down under the platform-roofs clouds of greenish-white smoke against which the passengers hunched their shoulders and groped briefly as though in a fog. It was half-past three in the afternoon, and the Sunday express for the north was due in twenty minutes. •

The door of the station restaurant was constantly opening and shutting and often the wind would snatch the door from a passenger's hand and close it with a crash. The door was massive and hung on a powerful spring, and the sound of it shutting made an empty, melancholy echo. •

A man and a woman were drinking tea at a table in a corner of the restaurant. The woman often bit her lips and waited for the crash of the door to come as though waiting for a blow, and once she began a complaint in a voice that was loud and husky:

'That door'll drive me dotty. Why don't everybody have to work back-stage for a month? I only slammed a door once and that was in O'Neill's revue – the old O'Neill, you wouldn't remember him. I was only a kid myself. Just my luck, the manager happened to be walking past the dressing-room. Talk about hair off! I was only a kid. O'Neill told me I could dance and that was all I thought about. Charlie Mace was manager then – don't suppose you'd remember him either.

His wife shot herself – she was jealous of a tart Charlie was sweet on, and she wanted to show off I suppose.

‘But that was afterwards. I’d been Olga Ivanovna a good while then, four years or more. It had to be temper or nothing with old Charlie. He came in and chalked me off-till I cried my heart out. I was in the chorus in those days – two shows a night and two matinees, and living in a bed-sitting room at that and no jam on it. I couldn’t sing for a week after what Charlie said. I just used to open my mouth. I thought my heart would break.’

She ceased talking and picked up her cup and drank. She looked somewhere between forty-five and fifty and her skin, heavily powdered, hung in wrinkled, bluish-grey pouches under her chin and eyes. Age and hard work and indulgence had worn her lips until they were loose and drooping. She had tried to paint them into a firm line again, but the colour of the rouge was vivid and artificial, and the lips themselves were hard and pathetic in their falsity. She was wearing a cheap fur coat which she had thrown back over her heavy shoulders, showing a bright crimson dress stretched tight over her heavy bosom. She did not look like a dancer. Her hair had been dyed a light red colour and a wisp or two of it had fallen from under her black hat, half hiding her long scarlet ear-rings. Sometimes she shook her head in a quick curious way and the ear-rings danced, making her look both absurdly coquettish and a little more vulgar. When she sat still and talked, or when she drank and forgot herself, she looked as though she were worried by something and very tired.

‘Mind you, I ain’t saying that chorus work wasn’t good for me,’ she went on. ‘I was only a kid, and it

was the best thing for me. I was all silly kids' dreams when I first began dancing. You know – sort of thing that's no good to you or to anybody else either, only a nuisance. You like another cup of tea? I'll 'ave another myself then if you won't. It's in the pot.' She poured out the tea and looked at the rain slanting incessantly beyond the buffet windows.

'Might as well be wet inside and out, what do you say? Seen your bags all safe?'

'Oh! yes.'

'Costs you a pretty penny for kit, I'll bet, don't it?'

The man did not answer. He was young, sleek and unusually elegant; his clothes seemed to have been sewn very tightly to his body, giving the impression that they could never crease or slip a fraction out of place; beside him the woman with her cheap fur coat, her loud-coloured frock and her dyed hair, looked like a caricature in unkind colours. He had listened to her long garrulous speeches without a change in his expression of frozen boredom. He looked as though oblivious of her, and when he felt that someone was looking at him he succeeded in looking even more oblivious. He stared for long intervals at the rain on the windows and at the waitresses polishing glasses and serving tea behind the counter. She had come into the buffet for a cup of tea and quite by chance she had seen him sitting there. He was a conjurer and they had appeared for three nights at the same theatre; he had topped the bill and she, together with a low comedy duo, had been at the bottom. He performed all his tricks in absolute silence; it was profoundly impressive and he knew it; he walked on and performed and walked off again with an air of sublime indifference that held the world spellbound and breathless. By the

time Olga Ivanovna came on, the audience had become tired and critical. She had herself billed as the world-renowned Russian Ballet-Danseuse and Operatic Contralto; she began her turn by flitting briefly to and fro about the stage like a corpulent spirit, and then, because it tired her to dance for very long, she skipped from the stage, quick-changed into a deep-necked dress of crimson velvet, and swept grandly to the footlights and said: 'I veel now zing you a few selections from zee grand operas.' She sang something by Tosti and Gounod, and sometimes when she felt that she had missed her audience she sang 'Just a Song at Twilight'. Her voice was heavy and quavering and melodramatic, but sometimes the audience would fall for her and then she would go home to her lodgings and her supper of chops or fried fish with a feeling of elation and triumph. She had sung the 'Song at Twilight' the night before and suddenly she turned to the young man and said:

'You heard me give 'em "Just a Song at Twilight" last night, didn't you? They gave me a nice encore. Hear 'em whistling?' She paused and drained her cup and leaned forward on her elbows and said intimately:

'You know what fetches 'em, don't you? It's the name - the Russian touch. If I was plain Lily Miller they wouldn't look at me. Thanks, I don't mind if I do.' The young man dangled a cigarette case in front of her, and she took a cigarette and lit it and puffed a cloud of smoke into the air. 'And do you know what? You know what I should do if I were you? I'd be Italian - Mariano, something like that. It's your style. You're young - you ought to change now before you make your name. Think of Mariano in big letters on the Coliseum. See what I mean? It's romantic. It



fetches 'em. It pays too. You don't want to be drifting round the provinces all your life, do you? You can be clever and all that, but if your name don't catch you're nowhere. Look at me. Ever see a photo of me when I was a kid? — with a face like I had I ought to have been in Royal commands. Instead I never had a ghost until I changed from Lily Miller to Olga Ivanovna. Half a minute, I'll show you that photo of me as a kid. The train ain't due, is it?

The young man looked at the watch on his wrist and then looked at the rain and then at the dancer, all without answering. He felt bored to exasperation. Her voice was loud and coarse, and he wondered if she would ever stop talking. The train was not due for ten more minutes. The dancer put her cigarette in a saucer and searched through her handbag. He kept thinking how unlucky it was that she should have chanced to come into the restaurant and see him sitting there, and he felt that he detested her. He looked at her as she searched through her handbag for the photograph and he felt suddenly that she looked less like a dancer than an old prostitute, over-dressed and over-painted, worn out by more years of giving herself than perhaps she herself could remember. He looked at his watch again and at the same moment she raised her eyes and reached for her cigarette and put it between her lips. She had found the photograph.

'Don't rush off,' she begged him. 'The train ain't coming, is it? Pity we ain't goin' north together, I've got another half an hour to wait. Well, that's me. I was only a kid then.'

She began to powder her face with a big white puff, spilling a white sprinkle of powder over the big arch of her bosom. While she looked at her face in the mirror

of her handbag he accepted the photograph casually, holding it for some moments in his hands while contemplating the rain everlastingly sweeping in grey streaks along the railway lines.

'I was eighteen when that was took. I'd been in old O'Neill's show a week and I had that done out of my first week's screw.'

He looked at the photograph. For a whole minute he regarded it without raising his eyes.

'You're talkative, ain't you? I don't think,' she said.

He did not answer. He sat looking at the photograph steadfastly. It was the photograph of a young girl in a stiff-frilled dancing-dress standing quietly and unassumingly with her hands clasped before her. She was staring straight at him. He did not know what to think or to say. There was something marvellously enraptured and credulous about her gaze, as though she were really watching some shy and tiny bird in the eye of the camera. It was an unexpectedly thrilling and lovely face, delicate and proud, the big vivacious dark-brown eyes warm and soft as bees and the skin as white and fresh as the peel of a young mushroom. He did not recognize the dancer. Her figure was very slight and slender; the shoulders were round and sloping, and the breasts were swelling firmly to life against her dress. Under the photograph was written in black ink 'Lily Miller, 1903'. She had the tiny waist of the period, and the dim tropical palms and ferns in the background had begun to yellow and fade.

She finished powdering her nose and spoke to him again but he did not answer, and at the same moment the porters on the platform outside began to shout the arrival of the train. He suddenly took a final look at the photograph and gave it back to the dancer. The

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thick fresh white powder on her face made her seem more than ever cheap and weary.

'Not bad, is it?' she said. 'I was only a kid, don't forget. But you see what I mean? – a pretty kid don't stand a chance without a name. A name's everything. You can't afford to be yourself in our profession. I was a pretty kid, but what chance did I stand with a name like Lily Miller? I changed my name and look at me.'

'Here's the train. Goodbye,' he said. 'Where are you going?'

She had to catch a train to some obscure town in the south of Wales, and she would appear there for three nights and after that she had no other engagements to keep.

'Oh! I'm off west,' she said. 'I shall be in the north after that and then in London, and then I shall be on the piers in the summer – all over the place, in fact. You know! Lord knows where I shall be.'

He took another look at the photograph of the young girl lying on the table, shook hands very hastily and turned away to catch the train.

A moment or two later she followed him and walked beside the train and slowly waved her hand in farewell, but he did not look at her.



## A THRESHING DAY FOR ESTHER

THE engine itself stood between the cow barns and five stacks of wheat and barley, belching up clouds of black smoke into the tall poplar trees overstooping the pond. The storm was spending itself furiously, driving dark flocks of clouds low over the farm, spitting cold gusts of rain and yellowing the air with showers of poplar leaves. The stacks were ruffled like birds, and straws in thousands sailed upwards in tufts like golden feathers and were borne away into the distance with a pale mist of chaff from the drum and the black smoke writhing and sweeping over the fields in sombre coils. The air was full of the sound of sighing trees and a never-interrupted roar and stuttering from the engine and a moaning crescendo in the threshing-drum as the knives closed over the sheaves. Black and white hens were feeding everywhere in fluttering crowds. Except for a group of women standing under a wagon-shed, idly gossiping and occasionally tying the sacks, as they came from the drum, everybody seemed industrious and excited. The skirts of the women danced and flapped in the high wind like flags, and their voices were drowned in the everlasting roar of the threshing and the storm.

Esther was standing in the wheat stack next to the drum. She was dressed in an old blue woollen frock that was too tight in the bodice for her. Brown and slender, with long, slim legs and arms, and firm, pointed breasts that seemed to be trying to push themselves through her dress, she was like a branch of sallow. She was not more than fifteen. Her hair and

eyes were dark and the eyes had a passionate flickering of light in them like that of burning oil. Some neighbours had come to help her father thresh, and she was not wanted on the stack, but she had been standing there since breakfast, although hardly able to keep her feet in the wind, trying to help in throwing up the sheaves to the drum. Her movements were awkward and clumsy. Sometimes she hindered the men; sometimes she was not strong enough to lift the sheaves. Now and then she would lean on her pitchfork and lapse into a sort of watchful oblivion, gazing intently at the men as if fascinated by their dark figures, their feats of strength and their irresistible, indefinable masculinity. Her eyes at these moments would fill with a brooding solemnity, as though she were full of dreams.

The women sacking up the corn under the wagon-shed did not interest her. Soon, however, she noticed a commotion among them; they had ceased talking and were craning their necks and gazing in one direction.

A moment later there was a fluttering of expectation, and suddenly there dashed into the yard a white horse drawing a smart green cart driven by a tall dark man dressed in a black coat, yellow breeches and gaiters. He drove standing up, hammering the horse's quarters with an ash-stick, jolting up and down with exaggeration. His black head was thrown back and his white neckerchief was flying wildly in the wind behind.

The women, with their hands nozzling the sacks and with pieces of string in their mouths, were staring up at him.

The man flung the reins over the horse's back. There was mud on the horse, and its jaws were yellow

with foam. The man whistled, and from under the cart seat a grey whippet wormed itself out and sat upright.

'It's Pike!' someone shouted.

The men began to put up their hands, greeting him. He was evidently very popular. He turned and grinned, and then shot his hand like lightning into his loose coat and whisked out a rabbit.

'What price the dinner?' he shouted.

The threshers began laughing. The whippet put its nose to the rabbit's red snout and whimpered.

'Get down, you bitch!'

He held the rabbit higher.

'That's a lovely rabbit, that is, Pike, my duck,' called a woman. 'If you were a gen'leman, Pike, you'd give me that!'

'Who said that?' said Pike, wheeling about sharply. 'Who said it?'

'I said it!' A little perky-faced woman tying a sack thrust her face up to him with a haughty smile. 'Go on, give us that rabbit, Pike; be a gen'leman!'

'Give it you! Strike me! I'll give you something you don't ask for, and quick too!' He smiled cunningly.

The women sniggered and tittered among themselves. The whippet made a snap at the rabbit, but the man dealt her a blow on the nose and sent her cowering.

'How'd you happen on that, Pike?' shouted a thresher.

'How'd I happen on it? What's the dog for?'

'Lucky devil! I warrant you'd lose a farthing and find a sovereign any day.'

The man remained for a moment or two longer in the cart, laughing and bantering and displaying the rabbit which the dog had caught. There was something handsome and remarkable about his dark face, swarthy as a gipsy's, with its soft black eyes and

humorous, sardonic mouth, and something arresting in the good-natured sharpness of his manner and the glib words flowing from his lips as smoothly as oil. He jumped loosely down from the cart, and still carrying the rabbit, with the whippet sniffing behind, led his horse away, walking with a half-graceful swagger of his hips, like a woman. There was a sort of careless assurance about him and a proud, compelling indifference that kept the women staring after him until he had disappeared.

The girl also watched him intently, her dark eyes full of a solemn curiosity. There was a tender half-smile on her lips, as if merely to have set eyes upon him had given her a thrill of expectation and pleasure. And suddenly she no longer wanted to remain on the dwindling stack and watch the drum pouring out the grain, the men forking the sheaves, and the straw-jack everlastingly creeping up with the straw.

She slid off the stack, and, going to the corner of the stables, watched him put up his horse. He was between thirty and forty. The strange impression of his careless personality renewed itself as she watched him unharness the horse. Full of vague and indefinable longings, she started and trembled whenever she felt he glanced at her.

'There's a rat! Pike! Where are you? You're missing the sport!' someone shouted.

Threshers were standing in readiness about the stack with sticks and pitchforks, waiting for rats and mice to appear. At the sound of the voice the girl turned her head. Suddenly Pike ran past her, brandishing a long hawthorn-root as thick as a horse's leg. He reached the drum as someone shouted, and a young rat darted away from cover. He turned instantly and swung his



arm and struck one blow with the hawthorn-root, and the rat lay red and still.

He kicked it into a heap of straw and a smear of blood marked the wet ground, and he walked on. He walked with a sort of prowl, swaying to and fro, watching eagerly.

Someone had killed a rat, too, on the far side of the stack and was holding it up by the tail. Pike waved his stick and shouted and suddenly a drove of mice came scurrying towards him, scattering and squeaking like chickens in terror. He swung the root and brought it down like a flail, killing two or three mice at every blow. A mouse escaped and darted in and out of the straw towards the wagon-shed, the women perching on sacks, screaming and laughing and shouting for Pike to kill it. He followed it like a dog and scattered blows until he beat it to death as it fled to open ground. He laughed and picked up the carcass and flung it like a tangle of crimson wool into the midst of the women. They shrieked and fled, telling him only to wait until all was over and they could lay hands on him, but he merely waved his hand and smiled with shining eyes and jauntily went on.

The threshers clustered themselves about the last sheaves. Pike waited apart. Esther was able to watch him clearly, to feast on the extraordinary intentness of his black eyes and to feel the strange impression of his personality as he stood close to her.

She was startled by sudden cries from the threshers and screams from the women, and by rats of all sizes running in all directions. A rat as big as a leveret came scuttling straight for her and she shut her eyes and shrieked 'Pike! Pike!' in terror. The unexpected utterance of his name filled her with shyness and con-

sternation, leaving her faint and crimson as if the rat had really come for her. Opening her eyes she saw it lying dead a little distance away and Pike himself already slashing with the hawthorn-root among a litter of young. Empty of sheaves, the threshing drum came to a stop with a long moan. In the silence she was able to hear the squeaking of mice and someone called her name, asking her to come and see a nest of little ones, still blind, lying under a heap of black husks where the stack had been.

She crossed the stack-yard. Rats were lying everywhere, and every now and then another would scamper forth and run blindly away until Pike or another thresher brought the stick to its head.

She walked among the deserted rat holes and peered at the nest of young. The tiny mouse her father tucked into her hand seemed softer than a ball of velvet and she was not afraid.

As she squatted there, holding and stroking it, feeling the wind blow out her dress and hair, she became conscious of Pike standing close to her.

The sun came out, and the hawthorn-root blazed crimson where he had thrown it on the straw. In the strange silence she heard him boasting of the rats he had killed, and she knew he was wiping the sweat from his face. She dared not look at him: his achievement seemed horrible and wonderful, and her heart drummed against her breast as if in fear.

She heard him move away with the men. She stroked the mouse quickly with her finger-tips and gazed on at the nest of tiny squeaking things until she heard the drum being moved. Then she dropped the mouse and went hastily to where Pike was standing, unable to let him out of her sight again.

When they began to thresh the second stack, Pike threw off his jacket and took the place of Jasper Bird on the drum. Esther went to stand by the wagon-shed, by the women, in order to see him better. The women were talking about him.

'Don't he have all the luck!' one was saying. 'Look at that rabbit. That fair dropped into his lap, didn't it? He just whistles for whatever he fancies and it comes, and he takes no more notice, the lucky dog.'

'And see how he killed them rats, just as if they walked up and let themselves be killed, easy as easy. Ah! he's a Tartar.'

They began whispering together. 'If you'll believe me, he got hold of my arms last threshing day, and pressed me back against the straw-stack until I couldn't get my breath. I thought my ribs would crack. And then when he knew I couldn't keep him off any longer, he started tickling me and I fell on the straw.'

A fiercer gust of wind raised a storm of chaff and the women buried their heads in their aprons.

Esther moved away and sat on a pile of pine-wood and gazed at him again. The clouds were scattering, and there were intervals of sunshine, very pale and restful. Gazing up at his dark figure outlined against the sky, she could see the silvery flash of his knife as he cut the bands and threw the sheaves to the drum. Her eyes were still full of the same grave and meditative watchfulness and she kept them fixed on Pike as if afraid that he would fall.

## II

Pike was sitting on an empty oil-barrel under the wagon-shed, drumming softly with his feet and

whistling some bars of a comic song. His dinner was spread out on a white cloth over his knees, a piece of fat pork and a square of batter-pudding and a handful of purple cabbage wrapped in a sheet of paper. He was holding a large white loaf in one hand and was busy wiping his knife on his sleeve with the other. The threshing engine was silent except for a sound of escaping steam. Threshers and women were sitting about on sacks and boxes, talking and eating. Pike's whippet was lying under a corn-drill, pawing and worrying a dead rat. Jasper Bird and his wife and an old man with white hair and trembling lips and ancient blue eyes were seated in absolute silence on some sheaves piled up against a wagon-wheel under the wind, a little apart.

'Yes, I've been in service.' Pike cut off some pork and dipped his bread in cabbage juice as he spoke. 'And in service to a lady as well. I know all about putting ladies to bed and getting them up in the morning, I tell you.'

'Oh! get along with you,' said a woman. 'You've never been near a woman's bed in your life.'

Pike emptied his mouth of pork and bread and screwed up one eye.

'When I was in service to the Honourable Mrs. Alexander Timothy, let me tell you, we used to put the old gal to bed six nights out of seven, if you'd like to know. Drunk as a lord! With enough whisky in her to drown the children of Israel! And God knows what else besides, what with sherry for dinner and brandy with the coffee and a little something else to play with at the bottom of the glass in the firelight before ever she thought of whisky. And perhaps you don't know what she paid for that bloody whisky? Whisky, mind

you, not pig-swill. Never less than a quid a bottle. She'd think nothing of swigging a poor man's wages before eleven o'clock at night. And when she'd had enough she'd roll on the tiger-skin and pull the hair out with her teeth and wake the house up. And then the butler used to call me and we'd go in the drawing-room. He was an old fool. He used to look as soft as butter, rubbing his hands and bowing and asking her if she'd like "to retire". Retire! Christ! Either she'd be snoring already or she'd be raving the roof down. Retire! I used to say to him, "snatch hold of her legs quick, and go quietly". Fat old owl! Her bosom alone must have weighed as much as that sack of barley.'

He filled his mouth with bread and cabbage and gulped, shutting his eyes.

'Well, lucky enough the stairs in that house were as wide as a forty-foot lane, and somehow we used to drag her to bed.' His voice grew soft. 'The bed she slept in was as big as that wagon where Jasper's sitting. I often think about that bed. It had long pink velvet curtains and smelt of violets and night-scented stock or something, and the counterpane was every inch lace with an underneath part of red silk. Well, when we'd slung the old boozier in like a dead sheep, she'd begin to groan and say she was dying. The butler would get frightened and sweat like a bull and order me to run and get the maids to undress her. But you know if there's one thing a woman hates, it is another woman drunk. A woman'll put a man between the sheets as easy as winking, but she'd as lief draw twenty hens, stink as much as they might, as put a woman. And every jack maid in that house used to lock her door as soon as it went round that the old woman was drunk.'

And they wouldn't stir! You might knock at their doors for everlasting and they wouldn't stir.'

He filled his mouth with pork and gnawed at his bread. His dark eyes were bright and handsome, and there was something magnetic and strange about his soft speech and about all he said. He drummed his heels softly in the barrel and went on, eating and speaking alternately.

'I could get the maids to do almost anything, I tell you,' he said, 'but not that. And at last the old butler used to come running out with his shoes off and call me back. The room used to stink like a bar when I went in. Filthy! There's no one knows how the aristocracy live, only those as sees it. Wickedness! Pah!' – he paused and spat out a piece of gristle with a sound of disgust – 'pah! – we used to put her to bed. It took the two of us to roll her over on her chest, then I used to unhook her dress while the butler took care of her jewels. God! the jewellery on that old cow! Emeralds and diamonds and things you read about in the Bible hung round her bosom and neck as thick as peas in a pod! And wasted! Every bit of it wasted. Not a soul, only the servants, to look at her, the ugly old sinner, and sunk as low as driving out in her carriage looking for any man with nothing else to do.'

He paused, and a thresher looked slowly up and said: 'Pike, my son, that only shows what breeding can do.'

'Breeding! Let me go on breeding pigs if that's breeding.'

Everyone, even Jasper and Clara Bird and the old man by the wagon, began laughing. And Pike went on in a softer voice:

'Sometimes it took us an hour to get that old geyser

to bed. She'd rave and struggle and sometimes she'd be sick – yes, all on that beautiful counterpane. I used to hold her down while the butler dragged her dress off. It used to be easy enough till we got to her stays. I gamble you've never seen stays like that old woman's! They were like a ship-hurdle on her, buckled and laced and pinned and hooked so that the fat came out at her neck like rolls of suet. And underneath silk enough to make your heart ache. You'd die to see that silk, you women would. Well, there it is: we all know a woman like that ought to live in a pigsty and wear sacks, and I often used to wish she did, but what could I do?

'Only put her to bed?'

'That's it. Only put her to bed in her petticoats, and hope to God she wouldn't be at it again before you had the silver cleaned in the morning.'

'God knows what folks like that are fit for.'

'Yes, and I doubt if He knows justly.'

Pike finished his dinner and stretched his legs. 'Yes, she was a wicked, dirty old swine. God bless her though,' he said. 'She left me twenty pounds and a pair of pictures, though I'd sooner have had the bed than anything.'

He rose and walked from under the wagon-shed and whistled his dog. He turned his eyes upward and stood for a moment erect and immobile, gazing at the clouds, his whole being full of an unconscious and careless grace, like a lazy animal's.

Esther, who had not once stirred while he was speaking, followed all his movements with soft, attentive eyes. She was sitting on a heap of straw, and her limbs were cramped, and she would have liked to follow him, but she sat as if hypnotized and did not stir.

'Have a wet with me, Pike?' called a thresher, holding up a bottle.

Pike waved his hand and shook his head and sauntered away with his dog.

It was quite silent when he had gone. The intense atmosphere of listening vanished. Jasper and two of the threshers dozed off to sleep, one with his chin on his chest and his long red tongue lolling out. Little whirl-winds of chaff flew round and round. The girl herself sat in a kind of dream, in a thrill of meditation, giving herself up wholly to the memory of his lively, handsome face, his faintly mysterious personality and his romantic words.

Suddenly, when some time had<sup>3</sup> passed, the silence was broken by the loud report of a gunshot. The sleepers opened their eyes and sat up in fright, one of the threshers so violently that he bit his tongue.

Dead silence fell. At length one of the women slid off her sack and whispered:

'Pike, I'll gamble.'

They waited.

And presently there were footsteps, and Pike appeared, sauntering lazily along, the dog still at his heels, as if nothing had happened.

'You hear a shot, Pike?' said a thresher.

'I heard something.'

'See any shooters?'

'No, I didn't see any shooters.'

He began whistling softly, and very deftly slid a cock-pheasant feather down his sleeve and began brushing it with his fingers.

'Pretty feather,' said a woman.

'Ah!' Pike said indifferently, twisting it like a shuttle.



## A THRESHING DAY FOR ESTHER

'And it's come from some pretty bird? I guess it did.'

'You're clever, ain't you?'

'Oh! out with it. The luck fair drops into your lap from heaven. A bird would sit on a mole-hill and stare at you while you shot it.'

'Perhaps it would. Yes, perhaps it would.'

He threw away the feather with a smile. When the threshing began everyone talked of his amazing luck and of the pheasant he had shot while no one was looking, and the girl sat aside on the heap of pine-wood, in the sunshine, alternately rubbing the feather across her cheek and letting the light play on its colours, dazzled by its loveliness.

### III

Evening came on and Esther put the last mushroom, a little silky white button, into her basket with the rest, and hurried through the dewy grass of the paddock in the direction of the farm and the setting sun. The wind had dropped, and the engine had suddenly ceased and the air was silent. The sky was cold and clear as glass except for a flush of lemon and green above the sunset.

Her heart beat faster when she looked at the mushrooms and she was afraid of being seen in the paddock. Coming to the gate by the stack-yard she saw the Birds drive off, and heard the engineers shouting as they coupled up the jack and the drum ready to go away, and her heart sank in fear.

The heavy scent of newly-threshed corn and smoke and the dampness of evening filled the farmyard. It was already shadowy in the wagon-shed and between

the stacks of straw. As she passed the engine, encountering its sudden warmth and looking in all directions for Pike's white horse, she saw her mother watching from the kitchen door and hid herself quickly in the shed, afraid of being seen.

After standing there a little, her heart pounding in her throat, she caught sight of the horse. It was already harnessed to the cart, and it was waiting by a stack of barley straw, in the farthest corner of the yard. She could hear the tinkle of its bit as it champed the straw.

She skirted the stacks and stood tensely still by Pike's horse and waited: and gradually she heard the rattle of couplings and the heavy grinding of wheels and knew that the engine was departing; she heard many voices, and among them, for the first time since returning, the voice of Pike himself, and the sound of it filled her with an ecstasy of joy and apprehension that was like a sickness. Why was she there? she began to ask herself. What would she do when he came? Hadn't she better run away and give the mushrooms to her mother before he had time to come? What would he do when he found her there?

But she did not move, and presently by the louder clanging of wheels and the receding voices and the black smoke floating away over the darkening fields she knew that the engine was leaving the yard. The sounds grew fainter. A woman ran past, waving something above her head, shouting:

'You old fool, left your waistcoat again! You'll leave yourself next!'

Her voice faded, too. The yard became silent except for the hens scratching among the straw and Pike's horse nodding its head. She looked into the cart

and saw the gleam of a gun-barrel, and the rabbit and the pheasant lying side by side there in a pool of blood. The clouds above the sunset were turning purple and red, and one of the darker clouds loomed up and resolved itself into a flock of starlings that flew over with a whisper of beating wings.

She heard a whistle and saw the horse prick up his ears, and she longed desperately for one second to be swallowed up in shadow, but a moment later Pike was there, standing before her.

It seemed to her that he looked darker and taller in the twilight, and all at once her thoughts and her will subjected themselves to him. The sound of his voice murmuring in astonishment, 'Esther!' seemed to her full of an unbelievable tenderness, and she forgot all that she was to have said to him and stood instead in an attitude of solemn adoration, gazing shyly at him with her head thrown back against the straw. A sensation of sublime happiness overcame her merely because he returned this stare, and she felt herself trembling, the desire to explain everything at the same moment vanishing. She told herself that he divined the meaning of her presence there, and the thought passed swiftly through her mind and made her smile.

He returned her smile, too, and came a step nearer and stood so that he was gazing down at her. Slowly the sensuous, smiling, almost ironical expression in his black eyes began to bewilder her. She saw him raise his arms and felt him seize her own with a gentle eagerness that flooded her with a tumultuous happiness followed by weakness and terror. She tried to lift her arms and push away the dark face bearing slowly down on her, but she felt the pressure on her arms increase,

and something began slowly to crush her breast until she closed her eyes. Quickly and impassionately, pressing her head relentlessly farther and farther back against the straw, Pike began to kiss her, kissing her as if he would never release her, until the very life in her seemed to surge up and career away from his touch in a dark flood, leaving her faint and drunken.

Gradually, after a long time, she left herself being released, and the pain of being suddenly severed from him, followed by the long, exquisite kiss, seemed to stun her, and she felt her eyes filling with tears.

She felt ashamed of her tears, and did not know how to face him. She turned and pressed her face against the stack, struggling against her sobs as she struggled against the kiss, weak but happy, feeling as if her soul had been frightened and bruised but transported by some emotion at once too powerful and exquisite for her to comprehend.

'What is it?' said Pike. 'Don't you like being kissed?'

The half-soft, half-ironical words burned in her mind long after she had heard the last flick of the whip, the horse's feet rustling through the straw and the sound of wheels retreating farther and farther away.

She lay down and thrust her face into the straw. The sky drew darker, and a flock of starlings flying overhead with a low whirr of wings could hardly be seen. It comforted her to breathe the sweet scent of the straw. A mouse that had escaped came out in the silence and rustled away, and listening to it her thoughts went back to the early morning, the rats, the story Pike had told under the shed, the pheasant he had shot, and at last the kiss he had given her. The

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memory of these things filled her soul suddenly with a flood of miraculous, sublime happiness difficult to bear. She gave a long sigh and slowly the grief on her face faded, and raising her head, she fixed her eyes on the dark sky, already pointed with stars, and smiled.

No sooner had she begun to smile, however, than it seemed as if her heart would break.